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TEXAS JACK, THE PRAIRIE RATTLER; or, THE QUEEN OF THE WILD RIDERS.

A Romance in the Life of a Real Hero—John B. Omohundro—Texas Jack—and a Tale
of the Southwest Border.

BY HON. WM. F. CODY—"Buffalo Bill,"

AUTHOR OF "THE GOLD BULLET SPORT," "KANSAS KING," "DEADLY EYE," "THE PHANTOM SPY" ETC., ETC.



"YES, IT IS MY LOVELY RENA THAT IS COMING BACK TO ME, AND BY HER SIDE RIDES THAT PRINCE OF TEXANS, WHOM MEN
CALL THE THUNDERBOLT."

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CHAPTER I.

THE DON AND THE TEXAN.

"YOUR name is Texas Jack, senior?"
"So my comrades are pleased to call me, sir."

"I thought that I could not be mistaken, for to see you once is to forget you never."

"Thank you, sir: then we have met before?"

"But once, and then you rendered me a service which I can never forget."

"Ah, senior, I fail to recall it."

"Indeed! Then what men say of you is doubtless true, that you daily perform deeds of daring few others would attempt, and among them the one great service to me is forgotten."

"I am Don Castro Rivera, Senior Texas Jack."

"Still, sir, I must be so rude as to confess that your name even does not recall you to mind."

"Ah, yes, mine is an ordinary name, a common face, such as one meets in every crowd, while yours is one to remember always; but let me recall a scene of one year ago, a gala-day in the Alamo City, when, after the bullfight was over, as a senior and his daughter, his only child, were crossing the arena, a maddened beast escaped from his pen and dashed directly upon them."

"They stood, transfixed with horror, the populace gave one wild shout of terror at their danger that drowned the fierce bellowing of the infuriated *torro negro*,* and then there came a silence like unto death, and the Mexican and his daughter dropped upon their knees and awaited their doom with prayers upon their lips."

"But no! They were not to die, for suddenly there shot between them the form of a horse and rider, and then came the piercing shriek of the mustang, as the horns of the bull were driven into his sides."

"A struggle of an instant, a savage bellowing, a cloud of dust that veiled the sickening scene, a ringing voice:

"Fly for your lives, for the end is not yet!" and then one, two, three shots in quick succession, and a man sprung from out of the cloud of dust, leaving his dead horse and the slain bull lying together where both had fallen."

"Oh, senior, do you wonder that I have not forgotten you—you, who saved the life of myself, and the life of my child? You, who glided away before I could utter one word of thanks, and whom I have tried so hard to find? Do you know me now, Senior Texas Jack?"

The two men, the Mexican Don and the Texan ranger, sat upon their horses in the midst of the prairie.

They had both been riding along the same trail, the one from the east, the other from the west, and they had met, and, with one glance into the face of the Texan, the Mexican had uttered the words that open this story, speaking in pure English, but with a marked accent.

The Mexican was well mounted, armed, wore the picturesque dress of his country, and was a man of forty-five, with a face that was refined, yet lacked strength.

The Texan was also well mounted upon a clay-bank horse, with long silver mane and tail, and every indication of speed and bottom, though he had a vicious look in his eyes as he glared at the animal ridden by the Mexican.

His saddle and bridle were of elegant workmanship, studded with silver, trimmed with the skins of wild animals, and with a long lariat coiled about the horn.

The rider was J. B. Omohundro—Texas Jack—a man whose life upon the southwest prairies and the northern plains has been one long scene of adventure, and of reality that casts romance in shadow.

A man of superb physique, wiry as an Indian and as untiring, he had a handsome face, full of light-heartedness, as though he looked ever upon the sunny side of life, and yet every feature was stamped with character, and the merry twinkle of his eyes could change in an instant into a deadly light, the smiling, reckless mouth become as firm as adamant.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, stuck in

cavalry boots, the heels of which were armed with massive spurs of solid gold which jingled at every movement of his feet; a velvet jacket, adorned with buttons innumerable, *a la Mexicana*, a gray shirt with a black silk scarf knotted sailor fashion, and a broad-brimmed sombrero, the rim and crown encircled with an embroidered wreath in gold thread, and a large gold five-point star looping it up upon one side. Certainly he was a striking-looking man, whether met on the prairie or in the town, and, with the repeating rifle slung at his back, and his belt of arms, a most formidable-looking adversary.

The Mexican was a ranchero of wealth, dwelling upon the Rio Pecos in a *hacienda* that was a grand old home, though isolated and gloomy, in spite of the luxuries to be met with within its walls.

The Texan was a ranchero also, but upon a humble scale, and dwelling on his lonely ranch on the head-waters of a small stream south of the *Llano Estacado*.*

Then too he was a hunter, guide, trailer, and cowboy chief, and loved the wild life he led for its dangers and excitement.†

In answer to the question of the Mexican: "Do you know me now, Senior Texas Jack?" the answer came frankly:

"Yes, Don Rivera, I know you now, and I am glad to meet you again."

"Come, my humble ranch lies yonder in that timber, and you are welcome there," and Jack pointed across the prairie to a distant clump of timber, about which a number of cattle and ponies were feeding.

"I will return with you, Senior Texas Jack, for I came hither to seek you."

"See! yonder come my cowboys, who accompany me, and I rode on ahead of them while they stopped to kill some game, so anxious was I to see you and enlist you in my service, for I am told that you are the only man that can accomplish what it is I ask of you."

Jack glanced across the prairie and beheld a score of horsemen approaching them, and one look was sufficient for him to recognize that they were a band of cowboys.

"And in what way can I serve you, sir?" he asked quietly of Don Rivera.

"Save my child once more, senior, and from a fate far worse than that which your courage saved her from before," cried the Mexican, earnestly, looking pleadingly into the face of the Texan, and clasping his hands as in entreaty.

"Gladly will I do aught in my power, sir, to save your daughter; but tell me what danger threatens her?"

"God only knows, senior; but she was stolen from my home by Comanches, who have fled with her to their village in the mountains, and men tell me that you alone dare invade their fastnesses."

"I will do what I can to save your daughter, Don Rivera," was the quiet response of the Texan, and he added:

"Come with me to my ranch and we will talk it over."

CHAPTER II.

TEXAS JACK'S PLEDGE.

It was a humble cabin home, built in the center of a "timber island," and in the midst of rolling prairies, that stretched far away to meet the horizon in every direction.

A cabin that would serve as a fort if need be, a spring of water at one side, a few acres of timber, several hundred head of cattle, a herd of ponies caught wild and tamed, with what comforts a plainsman would care for, and we have the ranch of Texas Jack, to which he had invited the Mexican.

Before the door, as the Mexican rode up with his host, was a negro of large stature, dressed in buckskin, and wearing a cast-off sombrero of his master, for he was Texas Jack's man-of-all-work, nay, shadow, and had been since the Texan had saved him from death at the hands of the red-skins some two years before.

Swinging in a hammock made of prairie grass and rawhide, was an Indian of the Tonkaway tribe, tall, slender, and with his dark face stamped with cunning and pluck combined.

He wore leggings of buckskin, moccasins, but the upper part of his body was bare, excepting a necklace of bear-claws that hung upon his broad, bronzed breast.

His hair was as black as night and hung below his waist, while a coronet of feathers was upon his head and a belt of arms about his waist, while leaning against the tree to which one end of the hammock was swung, was a lance, a bow and quiver of arrows.

Seeing his master approaching with a stranger, and some distance behind them a party

* The Staked Plains, or Texas Desert.

—THE AUTHOR.

† Texas Jack was born in Virginia, but ran away from home and went to sea when but ten years of age. After some years of sea service he was wrecked upon the Texas coast, and seeking work became a boy herder, his first step toward the fame he afterward won upon the prairies. He died in Leadville in June, 1880, of pneumonia.—THE AUTHOR.

of horsemen, the negro arose to his feet, laid aside a lariat that he was braiding, and called out:

"Injun!"

"Ugh!" was the answer of the half-asleep Indian.

"Massa Jack am comin', an' you better wake up, for he hain't by hisself."

The Tonkaway slipped out of the hammock in an instant, and fixed his eyes upon the coming horsemen.

As though convinced that all was right, he seized his lance, bow and arrows, and stood silently awaiting their approach, the very picture of a bronze statue.

"Ho, Ebony, stir yourself, for we have guests to supper, and we are all as hungry as coyotes."

"Ah, Red Snake, I am glad you have come in from your hunt," cried Jack, as he rode up, addressing first the negro and then the Indian.

"Yes, Massa Jack, hab plenty to eat right away, sab, for de Tonkaway hab fetch heaps o' game," answered the negro.

"Well, give us a good supper as soon as you can, Ebony, and, Red Snake, don't you go away for I may need you to-night."

"Me stay," was the reply of the Indian, and, having dismounted, Jack motioned his guest to a seat in front of the cabin, while Ebony led their horses away, and then, at his master's request, went on to meet the cowboys and invite them to the cabin to supper.

"Now, Don Rivera, you say your daughter is the Comanches' captive?" said Texas Jack, seating himself near the Mexican.

"Yes, senior, she left home for a gallop on the prairies, and I have not seen her since; but the peon who accompanied her came back and reported that a band of Indians had captured her."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday morning, senior."

"Did you strike their trail?"

"Yes, senior, we followed them to the crossing of the river, some leagues from here, and there we met a party of hunters, who told me it was madness for me to go on with my small force, as there were a number of bands of Indians about, and they had been driven away by them."

"I asked them what I was to do to save my child, and they bade me come to you, telling me that you were the only man that could rescue her, and if you refused to go, to give her up as forever lost to me."

"So, senior, I am here to see you; I am a rich man, and I will share my fortune with you if you save my beautiful Rena."

The Mexican looked appealingly into the face of Texas Jack, who said calmly:

"Senior, I serve no man the way you wish me to serve you, for gold; but I feel for you in your deep sorrow, and I promise you that I will strike the trail to-night, camp on it, and on the morrow follow it wherever it may lead."

"The Virgin bless you, my noble friend, for with you as our guide and leader, my brave cowboys will not fear to follow you into the very heart of the Indian country."

"Pardon me, Don Rivera, but I must go alone."

"Alone?" gasped the Mexican.

"Yes, alone."

"You must go alone to rescue my daughter, while I remain behind?"

"No, no, Senior Texas Jack, this will never, never do."

"Then, Don Rivera, not one step will I take toward saving the senorita."

"Great God! my friend, what can you mean?"

"I mean, Don Rivera, that I know all the dangers to be overcome in this chase, and I am aware that strategy, not force, must be used against the Indians."

"Why, a regiment would do no good, while I, with yonder Tonkaway, who will accompany me, can do all that is necessary."

"Return, then, to-morrow, Don Rivera to your *hacienda*, and Texas Jack pledges you his word that he will bring you your daughter, or he will bring you a string of Comanche scalps in revenge for any harm they may have done her."

"Do you trust me, Don Rivera?"

"Ay, do I, for, senior, men have told me that Texas Jack was never known to break his pledged word," impressively said the Mexican, and he grasped the hand of the Texan just as the band of cowboys rode up and gave three ringing cheers for the "Lone Star Ranchero," as Jack was often called by the herders.

CHAPTER III.

IRON ARM'S CAPTIVE.

A MAN stood upon a jutting spur of a mountain, gazing out over the vast stretch of prairie that spread before him until it mingled with the distant horizon, the plain broken only here and there with a *motte* or timber island.

Yes, the scene as he looked was also broken by moving forms, horses and riders, pressing toward the spur upon which he stood.

They were a score in number, and red-skins, in all the glory of their war-paint; a wild, hideous lot to have in their midst a young girl who was scarcely over eighteen, and, in spite of her

* Black bull.

blanched face from which every particle of blood had been driven by fear, she was very beautiful.

Her slender form, clad in a dark riding-habit, drooped in the saddle as with fatigue, and the clean-limbed animal she rode seemed to have been pressed hard, for his head was bowed and his gait heavy.

The young girl had a face that should have called up pity even in the savage breasts of her captors, so pure, so lovely was it.

But yet those red warriors felt no sympathy for her, but hastened on toward their mountain village, glorying in having secured their captive.

The man who stood upon the mountain spur watching their approach was attired in a garb half-Indian, half-borderman, for about his neck hung strings of bear claws as a necklace, and strange devices were worked in beads into his buckskin shirt and leggings, while he wore a head-dress of gayly-colored feathers.

He was of pure white blood, yet his skin was darkly tanned, and his hair, worn long, was intensely black.

Carved in a perfect mold were his features, and handsome, ay, noble-looking he was, did one not look far back into those dark eyes and detect there untruthfulness, or watch the varying expressions that were wont to rest upon the stern lips, showing evil thoughts and wickedness in the heart.

Back in the shadow stood a gayly-caparisoned horse, and hanging to the saddle-horn was a rifle, a lariat, and a bow and arrows.

"They are coming, and they have been successful."

"Now my fortune is made, or my revenge shall be complete," muttered the man, as he turned a small glass upon the party upon the plain.

As he spoke his eyes flashed triumphantly, and an expression rested upon his lips that was one of malignant joy.

"The girl droops in the saddle, as though they had pressed her hard, fearing pursuit; but woe be unto those who dare follow their trail into these hills, even be it a regiment from the fort."

Nearer and nearer came the party on the prairie; they reached the foot-hills, and then began the climb up the steep ascent until they halted, their ponies being fagged out, upon the spur upon which stood the man awaiting them.

"The Cunning Wolf has done well, and the Iron Arm will not forget him or his braves," said the white man, speaking in the Comanche tongue to the chief of the band of warriors, who answered:

"The Cunning Wolf is glad that the Iron Arm smiles on him and his braves for bringing him the Snow Lily of the pale-faces."

With no other word to the Indian, and a wave of the hand as though dismissing him and his warriors, the white man, who had called himself Iron Arm, stepped to the side of the jaded horse ridden by the captive, and glancing up into her face, said calmly:

"Welcome, Senorita Rena Rivera, to the home of your old lover, Mark Melton, but now known as Iron Arm, the renegade chief of the Comanches."

He spoke with a sneer, and gazed upon her with a look of triumph in his face that was almost fiendish, while she shrunk back in her saddle from his touch, and said in a quivering voice:

"Seeing a white man when I rode up, I deemed that mercy would be shown me, even though the captive of savages; but now that you call yourself Iron Arm, the renegade, I know that a hungry wolf would show me more pity than I may expect from you."

"Why, sweet Rena, what right have you to expect mercy at my hands?"

"Why do you call me Rena Rivera, for such is not my name?"

"Ha! are you wedded? Have you changed your name since last we met?" he asked quickly.

"I never bore the name of Rena Rivera, nor am I married, Sir Renegade," was the haughty reply.

"Bah! girl, are you trying to deceive me, your old lover, to whom you were once pledged?"

"I was once pledged to you? You were once my lover?" cried the young girl, opening her eyes wide with amazement and horror.

"Certainly, sweet Rena, you were once my pledged bride; but when luck went against me, and I lost my fortune and had to fly, because I took revenge on the man who won it at monte, your father and yourself cast me off utterly."

"So be it; I lived in hope, and now that I am all-powerful as the chief of this Comanche tribe, I have determined to bring you and your father to terms, make you my wife, and with the fortune which I know to be yours in your own right, we will seek a home far from here, and live in luxury, for I love you, Rena, with the same devotion I felt for you three years ago, when you were but a girl of sixteen."

"Speak, Rena, for it rests with you whether we will fly far from here and be happy together, or whether I be forced to visit my revenge upon you and your father."

"Great God! I am in the presence of a mad-man," gasped the maiden, clasping her hands together in her anguish, though they were bound around the slender wrists with rawhide thongs.

"Mad, am I, Rena Rivera? Oh, no! but you will think me mad if you force me to act."

"Come, with your willingness to become my wife all will be well, and I will carry you back to your father, pretending that I have lived the life of a hunter in these mountains, and rescued you from the Indians."

"Refuse, and by the blue heavens above us, I swear that you shall die, and I will lead a party of my braves upon your father's hacienda, seize him, and carry him to the Mexicans who so long for his blood as Don Gomez, the conspirator, little knowing that that famous man hides away in Texas under the name of Don Castro Rivera."

"Now, Rena Rivera, you know my terms, and the answer rests with you for good or evil to your father and yourself."

She gazed an instant at him, as he half-turned away, and then uttered a quick, thrilling cry to her horse.

The tired animal understood it well, and bounded away like the wind, eluding the desperate grasp the renegade made at his bridle.

"Good God! she will escape me, for the accursed horse heads straight down the spur and will dash over the cliff!" cried the renegade, and he rushed toward his own horse, which, startled by his rapid approach, turned and darted away from him with a snort of fright.

CHAPTER IV.

TEXAS JACK'S WILD RIDE FOR A LIFE.

A MAN was toiling slowly up a steep trail, leading into the mountains before him, while his horse was following closely behind him.

A glance was sufficient to show that it was Texas Jack and his superb clay-bank stallion, Yellow Chief.

Both horse and rider looked worn, and the flanks of the animal were streaked with foam and dust.

"Well, Chief, we are here at last, and we have got to look out for ourselves, as the red-skin camp is only a few miles from here up in the mountains," said Texas Jack, halting upon the summit of the ridge he had ascended, and keeping in the shadow of the trees that lined each side of the spur.

After a short rest Jack left his horse to crop the grass that grew about him, while he cautiously advanced out upon the ridge, along the top of which ran a trail that seemed to be frequently traveled over.

"If the Comanches kept on as they were going, they should be in the foot-hills by this time, and the Tonkaway will arrive after dark, for he will not dare approach the hills except under cover of the night; so I will wait here until the red-skins pass, and then camp on their trail until Red Snake comes up," muttered Jack, as he turned slowly into the trail leading up the mountain.

But he had gone but a hundred paces when he stopped short, listened an instant, and turning, fled back toward the shelter where he had left his horse.

Hardly had he disappeared in the foliage when there came dashing down the trail a horse and rider, and the sight filled Texas Jack with horror, for the animal's reins were flying loose, and in his saddle was a young girl, her bound hands clasped and held upward as though in supplication to Heaven for succor.

"Great God! it is the one I seek! the Senorita Rivera, and this ridge ends in a cliff!"

The words came quickly from the lips of the Texan, and as he uttered the last word, the animal dashed by where he stood hiding in the foliage.

"Come, Chief, you must overhaul that horse, or the girl is lost!" cried Jack, and he threw himself into the saddle and darted out from the sheltering trees in hot pursuit.

He did not doubt but that the maiden had red pursuers upon her track; but to face them was an afterthought, for the girl must be saved first, for the cliff was not far away, and did the flying animal go over its edge, he must fall two hundred feet into the valley below.

"Come, Chief, don't tarry," cried the Texan, touching his tinkling spurs to the flanks of his horse, which was flying down the trail with the speed of a deer, and with every bound drawing nearer to the one he was in chase of.

Around a curve in the ridge dashed the horse ridden by the maiden, and the next instant Yellow Chief followed.

"God above! too late!" cried Jack, as he saw the cliff before him, and not two hundred yards away, with the frightened animal rushing blindly toward it.

He saw the maiden start when she realized her danger, which her now thoroughly frightened horse did not see in his blind fear, and, in a voice that rang like a trumpet, he shouted:

"Throw yourself from your saddle!"

She heard his words, for she turned her head, and borne back to him came the cry:

"Never! Better death, yonder, than remain your captive!"

She had mistaken him for Iron Arm, and with set lips Jack now urged his horse forward, driving the spurs deep into his flanks.

But nearer drew the fugitive animal to the cliff, and it seemed as though no power on earth could save him from dashing himself to destruction, bearing with him his beautiful mistress.

"The lasso is my only chance! I'll try it, for I can never reach the side of that horse," cried Jack, as he grasped the coil of rope about his saddle-horn and swung it in a circle round and round his head.

The flying horse bearing the maiden was now within a few paces of the cliff, for a half-dozen more bounds would carry him over.

Upright in her saddle, and seeming to fully realize the awful death that awaited her, the young girl sat, her bound hands clasped together, and raised, as though in prayer, and her face upturned, the lustrous eyes being closed to shut out the appalling sight that would otherwise be forced upon her gaze.

Behind her, only the length of his lariat away, Texas Jack came on like the wind, whirling the lariat about his head, and watching the instant when he had decided to throw it.

Did he throw it before the horse reached the edge of the cliff, he well knew it would be but to drag the maiden to the earth, perhaps to kill her, and at any rate to hurt her seriously.

She had refused to slip from her saddle at his ringing command, and, determined to save her, he had calculated the chances in his favor, then the fearful odds against him.

But those odds he must and would take, and in taking them rested the only chance against death for the young girl.

Another bound, and the fear-maddened horse shot over the edge of the cliff, with a wild neigh as he realized too late his awful peril.

But at the same instant the lariat was thrown with terrible force through the air, and Yellow Chief was dragged back upon his haunches to catch the weight that must come upon him.

Straight as an arrow at a target flew the coil, over the upraised hands and head it passed, about the slender form it tightened, and, while her horse swept downward to death, the young girl was lifted from her saddle and swung in mid-air, upheld by the strong lariat, while, feeling her weight, though not seeing her, Texas Jack cried in a quivering voice:

"Thank God, the lariat holds and she is saved!"

CHAPTER V.

THE TEXAN AND THE RENEGADE.

HARDLY had Yellow Chief been thrown back upon his haunches, to receive the weight that must come upon the lariat, when Texas Jack sprang from his saddle to hasten to the rescue of the young girl, whom his skill as a lariat-thrower had arrested in her downward flight to death.

He had remembered that the cliff retreated backward from its edge, so that there was no danger that the girl, swinging to and fro like a huge pendulum, would be dashed against the rocky sides; therefore, excepting her terrible fright, he expected to find her unharmed.

But hardly had he reached the edge of the cliff and gazed over, than he was startled by the clatter of hoofs thundering down the trail.

One glance showed him that the lariat held the maiden firmly, having settled above her waist; but her head had drooped forward, her arms had dropped from their supplication, and, as she vibrated to and fro from that dizzy height, he knew that she had swooned away.

It was a most critical moment for the unconscious maiden, as well as for Texas Jack, for he knew that he had to turn to face whoever it was that was coming down the trail toward him at such headlong speed, while if Yellow Chief were to get startled and bound away from the stand where he was, the death of the poor girl was certain.

Wheeling quickly he sprang to the side of his noble horse, and said soothingly:

"Hold firm, old fellow, and I'll take care of us all."

With that he bounded up the trail to a tree a few paces distant, and had just gotten to its shelter when there dashed into sight a horseman.

It was Iron Arm, the renegade chief.

His eyes were fixed upon the cliff ahead, and beholding the horse of Texas Jack, standing as he did, one end of the taut lariat fastened to the saddle-horn, the other out of sight over the edge of the jutting rock, he came to a sudden halt while his eyes searched the scene for the rider.

Instantly he saw him, for Texas Jack, apparently recognizing the horseman, stepped from behind the tree, covering him with his revolver, while he said calmly:

"We meet again, sir, and this time I know you as you are."

"Ha! Texas Jack! what do you here in hearing of five hundred Comanches who seek your life?" cried Iron Arm.

"Do you see that horse?" asked Jack, coolly.

"Yes."

"You notice that he holds a weight at the other end of the lariat?"

"Yes."

"Well, that weight is the form of a young girl whom your warriors captured, and whom I came here to save, and I do not intend that you and your whole tribe of red-skins shall prevent my doing so."

"Hold, Texas Jack, and don't talk like a fool, for a call will bring my warriors to my side," said the renegade, angrily.

"Just call them, if you wish that they shall find you dead and scalped when they come, for I am not one to miss a villain, when I draw trigger on him."

"Texas Jack, I want no quarrel with you, for you saved me from a cruel death once, and—"

"Which I regret now, as I have since learned that you are Iron Arm, the renegade, though then I believed your story that you were an honest hunter, and therefore saved you from being hanged as a horse-thief by the cowboys."

"Now I know you, I would draw trigger on you with pleasure."

"And your shot would bring my braves upon you."

"Bah! you cannot scare me with Indians, while I have my good horse near me, and my arms; but, come, dismount, and let me look after you, that I may rescue that poor girl ere she returns to consciousness and goes mad with fright."

"That girl is my captive, Texas Jack, and you have but saved her from death, for me to wreak my vengeance upon her," was the hoarse reply of the renegade.

"Dismount from that horse, you accursed renegade, or I will send a bullet through your heart," was the ringing response of Texas Jack to the last words of the renegade.

CHAPTER VI.

TAKEN AT DISADVANTAGE.

We left Iron Arm, the renegade chief of the Comanches, in a most perilous situation, equally as much so as was the maiden who still swung to and fro at the end of the lariat, for Texas Jack was walking toward him with his revolver covering his heart, and the look of a man who intended to pull trigger if he was not obeyed.

Iron Arm knew the Texan well, and his deadly aim with the revolver was known in all that Southwest country, so that he could not hope that he would miss him, should he fire.

His own weapons were in his belt, and he dared not make an attempt to draw them, well knowing the slightest movement would cause his death.

Straight up to Iron Arm walked the Texan, and again he spoke, and in a tone that showed he would stand no trifling:

"Dismount or die! Take your choice!"

With an oath Iron Arm started to dismount, intending to get down on the opposite side of his horse from Texas Jack; but the latter was too cunning to be caught by any trick, and seizing the leg of the renegade, he dragged him back with a force he could not resist, while he shoved his revolver hard against his body, and said, sternly:

"This side, sir!"

There was nothing to do but to obey, and Texas Jack quickly disarmed the man, and then ordered:

"Lie down, sir, flat on your face!"

Again an oath broke from between the teeth of the renegade, but he promptly obeyed, and reaching for the lariat that hung on the saddle-horn of his captive's horse, Texas Jack bound his hands behind his back, and then securely hopped his feet.

"Now you'll wait until I'm ready for you," said the Texan, and he bounded rapidly to the edge of the cliff, his face wearing an anxious look for the girl who had swung between heaven and earth all these minutes, held there by the faithful Yellow Chief.

He looked over with fear and trembling, lest he should see the maiden conscious and crazed with fright; but the hands still hung listlessly before her, the head still drooped, and he was confident that she was yet in a swoon.

Then the terrible thought came to him that she might be dead!

Lying flat down he leaned over and began to draw up slowly the precious burden, the while speaking a kind word to his horse, for fear he might move suddenly, cause him to loosen his hold, and thus cut the lariat upon the jagged rock.

At last his hand grasped the coil about her body, and, seizing a firm hold, he drew her over the edge of the cliff to safety, while great beads of perspiration broke out upon his face, and he almost gasped for breath, so great had been the suspense.

"Bravo, Texas Jack! You have done what few men could do," cried Iron Arm, as he lay bound, gazing upon every action of the Texan.

But Jack made no reply, for he hardly dared trust his voice to speak, and sat still, holding the slender form in his strong arms, and gazing down into the beautiful face, which was white and still, as though the life-pulse had ceased to beat forever.

At last he drew a deep sigh, and laid his fingers lightly upon the pulse.

The steady beat answered his touch, though faintly, and he said in a low tone:

"Thank God, she lives!"

"And so say I, Texas Jack, for I feared the shock had killed her."

"But now to business," said the renegade.

"What mean you?"

"I have an offer to make you."

"Which I will refuse."

"Hear me first."

"Well, go on."

"It is rumored that there are gold mines in these mountains."

"Yes."

"I can take you to a mine of vast value."

"Well?"

"I will lead you to it, and protect you as a miner from all my tribe, if you will give that girl into my power."

"Not for every mine in these hills would I."

"What is she to you?"

"A woman."

"Ah! you love her?"

"I never saw her but once before to-day in my life, and then not to speak to her."

"And yet you risk your life to come here in search of her?"

"Yes, as I would risk my life to save any woman in peril."

"Well, I love her, Texas Jack."

"Your love is an insult to her."

"Be that as it may, but she was once my promised wife."

"This innocent, beautiful girl once pledged to you?" demanded Jack, with scorn in his tone.

"Yes, for I was not always what I now am—a fugitive, a renegade."

"I admit that I believe you have been a different man, Iron Arm; but it is with the present, not the past, that we now have to deal; and, although you twice helped me out of a scrape where my scalp was wanted, I would shoot you down without remorse before you should bring harm upon that poor girl."

"Then you refuse to sell her to me for the secret of the gold mine which I possess?"

"Yes, she is not for sale."

"You would enrich yourself for life, and you could tell her father that the Indians had killed her."

"You are a fool, Iron Arm, to expect me to be as bad as you are; besides, if you knew of a mine, I well know that you would soon reap its riches and leave this wild life as a fugitive from justice."

"No, I have rescued the girl, and because you have done me a good turn in the past I will not kill you, but let you get back to your red-skin pals as best you can; but remember, if ever I meet you again, I will kill you if in my power."

"Now, sir, that poor maiden needs my care, and I will leave you, as soon as I have gagged you, for I want no yells for your braves."

So saying, Texas Jack stepped forward, and with a buckskin string and a stick was preparing to gag his prisoner, when suddenly down upon his shoulders dropped a huge Comanche warrior, from the tree overhead, and his weight and the blow bore the Texan heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIERCE ENCOUNTER.

THERE was one young warrior among the band of Cunning Wolf, who was a rising personage among his people, for, when no one else could find a trail, he was certain to do so, and with bow and arrow, lasso, and as a horseman, he had no superior.

His ponies were the best in the herd, his weapons were the finest, his tepee held more relics of the chase than any other, and in dress he was a dandy, while his courage none dared dispute.

With Iron Arm he was a great favorite, and it was to ask the renegade chief to let him take a few warriors on a raid upon the settlements, that he turned back when near the village, with Cunning Wolf and his people.

He had not gone very far when his quick eye detected a fresh trail, and he saw that it had been made by two horses going at full speed, and in the direction of the cliff, which he knew well.

Hastily he followed upon the trail to come upon a scene that gave him a surprise.

What it was the reader may well imagine.

Reining his pony back in the shadow, Blue Bird, as the young brave was called, hastily dismounted and hitching his rein over a limb, glided quickly into the bushes and disappeared.

After some time he reappeared, and he was among the limbs of a large tree growing a few paces from where lay Iron Arm.

Lying bound as he was, the eyes of the renegade fell upon him, and he gave a slight start, but was instantly calm and indifferent, as he saw Texas Jack just then draw the maiden to safety upon the cliff.

With the nimbleness of a squirrel, and as noiselessly as a snake, Blue Bird wormed himself

out upon a large limb that almost hung over the prisoner, and then lay quiet, and watching as patiently as a cat would a mouse.

What passed between his white chief and the Texan he did not understand; but he fully comprehended the intention of Texas Jack, when he stepped forward to gag Iron Arm, and then he drew himself up like a panther ready for the fatal leap.

The Texan was ten feet from him, and more than that distance beneath him; but the Comanche warrior knew that the body of his foe, would break his fall, and he sprang upon him in a heap.

Of course, beneath such a weight and blow Texas Jack could not but go down, and he fell heavily, the Indian on top of him, while Iron Arm shouted forth:

"Bravo, my brave Blue Bird! This shall make you a chief!"

But, fortunately, Texas Jack had not been hurt by the blow or fall, and, ever on guard against a surprise, he had his powerful grip upon the red-skin, ere he fell to the ground.

The shock, however, had knocked the revolver out of his hand, as it had also the knife which Blue Bird had held, and it therefore became a struggle for mastery, with the odds against Texas Jack, should the renegade chief be able to take a hand in the encounter.

Blue Bird was a larger man than was his white foe, and had so often mastered the warriors of his tribe that he had come to believe that no one could equal him in strength.

He was therefore considerably taken aback when he found that his white adversary was not a man to easily handle.

He could have sent an arrow into Jack's heart from a distance, but he had recognized the famous ranchero, and wished to gloat in having captured him alive, and at the same time saved his chief's life.

Confident, therefore, he had not hesitated to match himself against the Texan.

As for Jack, he had feared that each moment might bring upon him some of his foes.

He had therefore been only surprised at the direction from whence the red-skin had come, as he had been taught to look for good, not bad things from above.

Retaining his presence of mind, cool and determined to make it a death-struggle, while he was delighted that no other Indians were in sight, he began business at once, and the grip he got upon the savage was not shaken off.

Of all the men on that Southwest border, Texas Jack knew that he had not met his superior in strength, and he was therefore a little surprised that he could not have it all his own way with the Indian; but, knowing that he had a foe worthy of him, he nerved himself the harder to the task of triumphing over him.

Lying bound apart, Iron Arm gazed upon the fierce combat with interest.

By rolling in the way of the white man he might have worried him, and in many little ways aided his red comrade; but he was too great a lover of sport to interfere, unless it was absolutely necessary to save his own life, and in fact, realized then how little it was that he could do.

Like snakes wound together the two men fought, rolling over upon the rocks, rising to their knees, then to their feet, to fall again and wind about in every conceivable shape.

Now and then Texas Jack would free his good right arm from the grip of the Indian, and send his fist into his face with terrific force; but before it could be repeated the savage would have his tenacious grasp upon him again, well knowing that such punishment, which he had neither the white man's power nor skill to deliver, would soon end the encounter.

Once in the fierce struggle Jack cast his eyes toward where he had placed the maiden.

She was there, and, to his great relief, was still unconscious.

The Indian, finding that he was not a match in strength for his white foe, determined to end the affair in his own way.

He felt his strength giving out; the few blows Jack had given him dazed him, and the power of endurance he possessed must yield to that of the Texan.

"Blue Bird has to die; pale-face dies too!" he hissed, and he bent every effort to force Texas Jack to the edge of the escarpment, for when once there, he knew the struggle could end but in one way.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TONKAWAY'S TIMELY SHOT.

BY an exertion of superhuman strength, the Comanche transferred the scene of combat to the cliff-brink before Texas Jack fully realized his fell purpose.

He had heard the words of Blue Bird, and understood them, for he spoke the Comanche tongue; but their import he did not grasp, until he saw himself pressed toward the very edge of the cliff.

He had thought that the Indian meant that if he killed him, he would be so used up by his victory as to die, too; but realizing now that the Comanche meant to plunge with him over

the cliff, he put forth every endeavor to prevent it, and to keep the combat upon a more solid basis.

"No you don't, Mr. Comanche," he gasped, checking their flight to the precipice's edge by a giant effort, which enraged the Indian to madness, for he endeavored to fasten his teeth in the face of his foe.

The act of Blue Bird was, however, understood by Iron Arm, who, not wishing to lose his best brave, determined to make an attempt to save him by doing all in his power.

At once he began to make his way as best he could toward the combatants, when his act was detected by Texas Jack, who quickly called out:

"Ho, Chief! watch him! watch him, boy!"

The noble animal had stood apart, gazing with almost human interest upon the struggle; but at this call of his master, he seemed to understand what was intended of him, and trotted right up to the bound renegade, showed his glittering teeth, and checked his further progress.

"Ha! ha! Iron Arm! I dare you to move," cried Jack, panting for breath, and the chief knew better than to do so, as the vicious horse stood ready to jump upon him and trample him to death, or to rend him with his teeth.

"Oh, God! must I remain quiet, when a brute teaches me my duty?"

The words broke from the lips of the captive maiden, and she essayed to rise to her feet, as though to go to the aid of Texas Jack, who saw her movement.

But her deathlike pallor showed that her strength had gone from her, and she was unable to stand, and with a low moan her head drooped upon her breast, while she murmured:

"No, no, I cannot save him! I have not the power to move."

In the mean time the two fiercely-struggling combatants had reached the very edge of the cliff, and, still grasping each other, the two lay glaring with savage hate, the one upon the other.

As they thus lay the Texan held the advantage, for the Indian was nearest the precipice.

Could the red-skin once more start to roll, he would go over the edge of the cliff with his pale-face foe.

This Jack well knew, and he braced himself so as to prevent it.

Thus they lay for some minutes, gaining breath, and then Blue Bird put forth every atom of strength for the last fatal struggle, and made his giant effort to go over the cliff with his enemy.

And, so terrific was this effort, that it was well-nigh successful; but, at the last instant, in the very nick of time, Texas Jack wrenched his body around, and was thus dragged to the very edge.

A moment of suspense, another struggle, and the red-skin's body went over, and for one brief second of time it seemed that his white adversary must follow him.

But the toes of his cavalry boots Texas Jack drove hard down upon the rock, his knees and elbows were thrust forward, and though they were blistered, they held him firm, and he remained on the cliff, with the red-skin swinging over, and each still locked in the other's clutch with a grip that death alone could separate.

In horror the young girl gazed upon the sickening scene, and then, with a cry, she fainted.

In terror, called up to even his hardened heart and brain, Iron Arm, the renegade, beheld the two, and a curse broke from his lips with the words:

"Good God! both must go now!"

The Indian knew well that the end had come, and was prepared to meet it; but he would not release the grasp he still held upon his foe, and yet hoped to drag him over with him.

And Texas Jack felt that it was but a question of time as to how long the Indian could hold out, and as to whether the red-skin could use any means to drag him over, was a still more anxious thought.

This latter idea seemed to strike Blue Bird, as he saw that his white enemy was yet capable of considerable endurance, while he was well-nigh exhausted, and he began to see if he could not work him over the cliff in some way.

By jerks he managed to draw the Texan a few inches nearer the edge; but at this he knew he could not hold out long enough to accomplish his purpose, so he drew his legs up under him, and a yell of joy broke from his lips as he felt one foot touch the rocky wall beneath.

Texas Jack realized fully what advantage the red-skin had gained, for, with the weight of his foe against him, added to a determination to force him over with him, and the pushing of his feet, he held him in his power, as, lying flat upon the smooth rock he could get no clutch, no purchase.

"By the Star of Texas, but this is a hard death to die!" came from between Jack's white lips, but otherwise there was no crying out against his fate.

He had faced death boldly with hope of life, and now, when there seemed no hope for him, he would not repine, but meet the end as a brave man should.

Slowly he felt himself slipping toward the very brink.

He knew that he could call to his horse to cease guarding the renegade, and get the latter to save him by rolling to his aid, and so hold him until the red-skin's strength must give out, by promising to set him free, and let him take the maiden captive; yet he would not do so, would not accept life upon such terms of dishonor to himself.

No, he had but one time to die, so let it be then, and he would die without flinching.

"You are drawing me pretty near the balance-spot, red-skin, and then down we go; but I'll not let go my grip on you until Death gets his on me," grimly said Jack.

But as he uttered the words, he started, his eyes flashed, and a cry broke from his lips, a ringing cry of joy.

Then he shouted, in tones that sent the echoes flying down the canyon, and startled the red-skin and renegade alike:

"Fire, Tonkaway!"

A yell came up from the valley below, then a whirring sound, and a death-cry burst from the lips of the Comanche, as an arrow buried itself deep in his back between the shoulders!

One desperate effort he made to drag his foe with him, and then his grasp released, while Texas Jack quickly recovered his balance, and keeping his hold upon the Comanche with his left hand, dragged his knife from his belt with his right hand, and hissed:

"I want your scalp, Mister Red-skin!"

With the words the trophy was torn from the head, and releasing his grip upon his foe, Texas Jack saw him dash downward with the speed of an arrow to crush to atoms upon the rocks far below.

CHAPTER IX.

HANDS UP, TEXAS JACK!

It must be admitted that Texas Jack had well-nigh met his match in Blue Bird, the Comanche, though under other circumstances he might have found the Indian more easy to handle.

The red-skin was stripped for the fray, and had the advantage of attacking under a surprise, while the Texan was hampered by his clothing, and had been knocked down at the outset, which, momentarily, was a drawback.

Had Jack been able to hold his own, and keep himself from slipping, the strength of the Indian would have soon given out, and he would have dropped, leaving his foe in safety.

But the wary Indian was not going alone to death, and with the slight resistance to being dragged over which Jack could make, he had the tide turn in his favor, and but for the shot of the Tonkaway, from the valley below, there is no doubt but that Texas Jack would then and there have had his life end.

He was pretty well used up by the struggle, and after his last effort, which secured for him the scalp, he was forced to rest right there where he lay, to gain breath.

His head still over the edge of the cliff he saw the Tonkaway hastily leaving the spot from whence he had fired his timely and fatal shot, and then beheld him disappear in a thicket, where he knew there was a trail leading to the cliff.

Anxious about the maiden, whom a glance had shown him had a second time lost consciousness, Jack shook himself together, as it were, and slowly rose to his feet.

Turning, he started back, for he saw that he was again in trouble.

In the first blow of the falling Indian upon his back, he had had his revolver knocked from his hand, and in the fierce struggle that followed, his second pistol had been torn from his belt, and now lay some distance from him.

Now he stood, armed only with his bow-knife, while confronting him, and standing within ten feet of him, were three Comanche warriors, their arrows set and drawn back, ready for their flight to his bosom did he make the slightest hostile demonstration.

Texas Jack was never thrown off his balance, no matter what occurred, and a glance was sufficient to show him that he was in a deadly fix.

Then a look to one side showed him the crouching form of the captive girl, again conscious, and with her frightened eyes roaming from his face to the three warriors.

Next he glanced at Iron Arm, and beheld that worthy upon the ground, his face full of triumph and wearing a gloating smile.

"Well, I'm in bad luck, it seems," he said, coolly, addressing the renegade.

"Yes, Texas Jack, you certainly are, while I am in good luck to have Cuning Wolf and his two braves come suddenly to my rescue.

"You'll up with your hands, of course, for I don't wish my warriors to have to kill you!"

"I am no fool, Iron Arm, to commit suicide by resisting, where there is not the ghost of a chance for me."

"Then you surrender?"

"Of course."

"I do not promise to save you."

"Nor do I ask it; but I do ask that you let that poor girl go."

"Never."

"Will you prove yourself less merciful than the savages you herd with?"

"This is none of your affair, Texas Jack."

"I have made it such."

"And you are in my power, as is that girl."

"She knows my terms and if she accedes to them, all will be well; if she refuses, then upon her head rest what follows."

"Oh, sir; I do not know him, and yet he says that he seeks revenge upon me and mine," cried the young girl, again striving to rise, yet finding herself unable to do so.

"Bah! you talk like a madwoman, Rena Rivera, for well do you know me, and you shall find out that I will keep my word."

"This fool here has sought to rescue you from me, and you see that he has but shortened his days by so doing, as my warriors will torture him to death, for long have they wished to get this Curse of the Comanche Trail, as they call him, in their power."

"And you came here to rescue me?" said the maiden, in a low, earnest voice, turning to Texas Jack.

"Yes, lady."

"But you are not one of my friends, so why risk your life for me?"

"I risked my life for you, lady, as I would for any one in danger, and I only regret that I have not been able to keep the pledge I made to your father and rescue you."

"The pledge you made my father!" said the maiden, in a dazed kind of way.

"Yes, lady; but do not give up hope, for I'm not so sure that yonder renegade has it all his own way yet."

"Ha! you hint that you have aid at hand, Texas Jack!" cried Iron Arm, who had not known of the existence of the Tonkaway in the valley, nor understood Jack's words addressed to him, but who had supposed that he had managed to get hold of his knife, and thus rid himself of his red foe.

Still bound, for his warriors had glided upon the scene, their bows bent upon Jack, Iron Arm lay where he had been left by Texas Jack, with Yellow Chief standing guard over over him.

To one side was the maiden, crouching down in the edge of the thicket, and across the trail, near the chief, stood the warriors, with Texas Jack upon the cliff, his arms folded upon his broad breast.

With his face turned from the cliff, the Texan alone saw that another person had glided upon the scene to make the picture more thrilling.

CHAPTER X.

THE RENEGADE'S CALL.

THE suspicion once awakened in the mind of Iron Arm, the renegade, that Texas Jack had aid at hand, from his words, caused that worthy to quickly glance about him into the gathering shadows whither the eyes of the ranchero were turned.

But he saw nothing to cause alarm; yet, anxious, called to one of his warriors to release him of his bonds, while he remarked:

"I'll feel safer, Texas Jack, when I have you a prisoner in my village."

The Texan laughed lightly, and the warrior stepped forward to release his chief, to suddenly throw up his arms and fall dead upon him, an arrow in his heart.

With a cry of alarm the other two warriors turned to face their foe, and one sunk to his knees, his battle-cry upon his lips, as an arrow buried itself in his broad breast.

With a bound Texas Jack was upon the third, who had forgotten that he had left a dangerous foe in his rear, while facing about to find the one who had sent his comrade so quickly to the happy hunting-grounds.

With his war-cry cut short by the iron grip of Texas Jack upon his throat, the Comanche had no time for resistance, ere he felt the keen blade of his white foe forcing itself deep into his bronze bosom, while his glazed eyes beheld suddenly bound upon the scene the deadly foe of his people, Red Snake, the Tonkaway!

"The Red Snake has twice saved his white brother; he is a great chief," cried Texas Jack, dropping the burly form of the dying Comanche and grasping the hand of the Tonkaway, who answered:

"The Tonkaway is glad when the heart of the Thunderbolt is pleased; but the Comanches are yonder like leaves, and we must be on the trail."

"You are right, Tonk: so just get that renegade chief's horse yonder, for this lady, and we will be off; but where is your animal?"

The Indian pointed down in the valley, and stooping over the three slain Comanches quickly took their scalps, while Texas Jack said with a light laugh:

"Well, renegade, I've won the game once more."

"And do you intend to carry me a prisoner with you to the settlement?" somewhat anxiously asked the renegade.

"No, for I have no time to bother with you; but I warn you the next time, Iron Arm, you and I will be quits."

"When I believed you different from what you are I served you, and you more than repaid that service afterward, I admit, and this alone

saves you now; but beware of our next meeting."

"This is a threat, Texas Jack?"

"Yes."

"Then you beware of our next meeting," was the hoarse rejoinder.

Texas Jack laughed lightly, and remarked, as he walked toward the maiden:

"Make your way as best you can, Iron Arm, to your village, and set your warriors upon my trail, if they can find it in the darkness coming on."

Turning to the maiden, Jack continued:

"Now, lady, we must get away from this, and you will have a hard ride before you; but once we reach the valley below we can defy pursuit, and you shall soon be returned to your friends."

"God bless you, sir," she said, faintly, while Texas Jack severed the bonds that held her slender wrists.

It was with a great effort that she was enabled to stand, but the Tonkaway led forward the renegade chief's horse, and Jack raised her to the saddle.

"Curse you, Texas Jack, do you intend to steal my horse?" cried Iron Arm.

"I'll borrow him, renegade, and return him when I come back for your scalp."

"Good-by!"

"We shall meet again, my gallant Texan ranchero, and you remember, Rena Rivera—you may escape me now, but it is only for a time," called out the renegade chief as the party moved rapidly away.

Seeking the nearest break in the steep hillside they began the descent, and after considerable difficulty reached the valley, when their ears were greeted by the wild, ringing war-whoops of Iron Arm on the cliff above, summoning his warriors to his aid.

"Quick, Tonkaway, run on and get the saddle from the dead horse under the cliff," cried Jack, as they neared the valley, and the Indian sped away like a deer.

Arriving at the spot they found the Tonkaway with the side-saddle, which had been but little damaged by the fall, and it was quickly transferred to the back of the renegade's horse, and the maiden found a much more comfortable mount.

Red Snake, the Tonkaway, then led his horse out of a thicket near by, and just as night let its curtain fall upon the valley, the three fugitives started upon their flight for life, while the cliff above, upon which the lingering rays of the setting sun still rested, was seen to be crowded with a howling band of Comanche braves, who sent showers of arrows after their foes, and then disappeared to press on in hot pursuit.

"Come! we must not be taken now," said Texas Jack, sternly, and placing himself in the rear as a guard, he urged the Tonkaway and maiden on in advance.

But just then he glanced behind him and saw, standing upon the edge of the cliff, the tall form of the renegade chief; and as he looked he heard a long, loud, winding cry from the lips of Iron Arm, and felt that it was some signal.

The next instant a shriek from the maiden startled him, and suddenly there shot by him the steed of the renegade, bearing her upon his back.

The cry of the chief had been a call to his horse, and the animal, faithful to his wicked master, was speeding back to him like the very wind, and carrying his victim upon his back.

"Save me! oh, save me!" shrieked the young girl, in an agony of terror, unable to check the flying animal.

"Spring to the ground!" yelled Jack, as he spurred away in pursuit, hotly followed by the Tonkaway.

But the girl seemed dazed now, and did not obey, and as the fleet horse neared the cliff, at the base of which were now seen several warriors, Texas Jack hissed through his set teeth as he grasped his revolver:

"If I cannot save her I will kill her, rather than have her meet the fate that awaits her there!"

CHAPTER XI.

A TEXAN ON HIS METTLE.

We left Texas Jack, the poor captive maiden, and the Tonkaway chief Red Snake, in a situation of desperate peril, at the close of our last chapter, for the trained steed of Iron Arm, the renegade, hearing the call of his master, at once sped back toward him with the speed of a deer.

The animal was a good one, the fleetest in the tribe, and had the advantage of rest, while the Texan's horse, Yellow Chief, had not; but Texas Jack felt confident that he could overtake the flying steed, and rescue the girl from her new danger, did he have a few moments to spare.

There had, however, come rapidly down from the cliff, half a score of warriors on foot, and they stood in the shadow of the overhanging hill to catch their chief's horse when he should dash into their midst, and the Texan did not doubt but that others were coming hastily to the scene.

He was determined to rescue the young girl

at all odds, and rather than see her again fall into the clutches of Iron Arm, he was tempted, as he had said, to kill her, for again a captive, he saw no possible chance for her.

On dashed the horse bearing the maiden, right for the base of the cliff, where crouched the warriors, while above, distinctly visible in the lingering twilight, stood Iron Arm, loudly calling to the animal.

Coming like a tornado in pursuit, was Texas Jack, urging Yellow Chief to his utmost, and certainly gaining on the animal he pursued.

Bending forward in her saddle, as though all strength and hope had left her, was the maiden, clinging despairingly to the horse's mane, and gazing upon the Indians in her front.

A few more bounds, and the flying horse reached the base of the cliff, and half a dozen strong arms seized the bridle, while others drew her from the saddle.

That instant Texas Jack dashed upon the scene, his revolvers in either hand.

Then he sprung to the ground, and the rattle of his revolvers made deadly music, and he rushed directly upon the savages bearing the maiden away.

Instantly they were brought to bay, and turning, a fierce fight was begun, while in thunder tones from the cliff above, was spoken in the Comanche tongue:

"Let my warriors take that pale-face alive!"

Texas Jack had reached the side of the young girl, and had grasped her about the waist, at the same time attempting to retreat, but at the cry of their chief, the warriors rushed upon him in a mass, and although several fell beneath his unerring aim, he was borne down by numbers, and secured with buckskin thongs, with the quickness and perfection which only an Indian can attain.

But in the midst of the struggle, when eight or nine warriors were upon him, Texas Jack had noticed one thing which gave him hope, and which, cunning and observing as they were, escaped the eyes of the Comanches.

He had seen a tall form glide forward, and then retreat, leading away Yellow Chief and the horse of Iron Arm, and escaping with them undetected in the darkness.

"The Tonkaway yet lives, if they have got me and the girl," muttered Jack, in his cool way, and he glanced toward the maiden, who had also been bound, and stood near.

A call then came from the chief on the cliff to bring the captives up there, and wishing to distract their attention from the horses, Jack said in a low tone to the maiden:

"Do not walk, but make them carry you. I have a motive in asking it."

She bowed assent, and they both stood still when urged by the Indians to move on.

Finding their commands useless, the warriors were forced to carry their captives, the Texan giving them so much trouble that it took half a dozen to take care of him.

"My braves will return for our dead brothers," said the chief of the party, motioning to the three dead warriors.

"Yes, and your braves will find them scalped, or I don't know the Tonkaway," muttered Jack to himself, at the same time doubling up a huge red-skin by driving his head with terrific force just above his belt, and causing him to utter a howl of rage and pain.

With great difficulty the Comanches at last got their captives up to the ridge, where they were met by their chief, who came forward in the darkness and said, grimly:

"Well, my Texas Thunderbolt, you are again in my power."

"Yes, renegade, luck's against me just now," was the cool reply.

"And you, too, my sweet Senorita Rena, I shall have the pleasure of entertaining as my guest."

"Again I tell you, Sir Renegade, that I am not the lady you believe me to be."

"Bah! don't be a fool, girl, for my eyes do not deceive me. You are Rena Rivera and no one else. But come; we will not tarry here, but on to the village."

"You, Cunning Wolf, caught my horse and the animal that belonged to this ranchero?" and the last was addressed to the Comanche, and in that tongue.

Cunning Wolf had to confess that he had forgotten about the horses, in the excitement of catching the captives.

"Then send several of your young braves to look them up, and bring them on to the village," was the order, and the party moved up the ridge, Texas Jack giving no further trouble, to the surprise of his captors.

A walk of a mile or more brought them to the Comanche village, situated in a fastness of the mountain, and a most secure retreat.

Teppee fires burned here and there, and a vast crowd of braves, squaws and children assembled to greet the captives, and heap upon them abuse that made the maiden shudder, as she gazed into the wild, savage, cruel faces about her.

Into a log-cabin, which the white chief had built for his own quarters, the two captives were thrust, and before the door was placed a Comanche guard.

"There is a room for you, Senorita Rivera,

and one for you, Texas Jack, and you can make yourselves comfortable here until morning," said Iron Arm, and he turned and left the cabin, while his fair captive sunk down upon a bed of skins with a moan of despair.

But, Texas Jack at once began to look about him to see what possible chance he had of escaping, for he was convinced what his fate would be, as shown by his quiet remark:

"To-morrow the reds intend to have a high old time with me."

CHAPTER XII.

THE TONKAWAY STILL LIVES!

THE rejoicing in the Comanche village over the capture of their great foe, Texas Jack, and the fair captive, was very great, and the din fell most dismally and unpleasantly upon the ears of the wretched girl as she lay upon her bed of skins.

Suddenly the sounds were changed to a wail of woe; and Texas Jack, who understood well what this meant, muttered with evident pleasure:

"They've brought in the bodies of those braves, and find their scalps gone. The Tonkaway yet lives?"

Through a lookout in the door of his part of the cabin, Jack spied the tall form of the renegade chief approaching, and the next moment he stood before him, and asked angrily:

"Are you alone in these mountains, Texas Jack?"

"No; I have the company of yourself and about as bad a lot of red cut-throats around me as man could wish to avoid."

"You understand me, sir; I asked if you had comrades here with you, for I thought my braves had killed that Indian who was with you."

"Did they say so?"

"They hinted as much; but the Indians you killed under the cliff have just been brought in, and they have been scalped."

"Then I guess the Tonkaway yet lives," and Jack laughed lightly.

"Then, by Heaven, this shall be his last night on earth, for I shall put every brave in this village upon his track at dawn!" and Iron Arm wheeled angrily and left the cabin, unheeding the sobbing sounds that came from the adjoining room.

Soon after his departure the village began to quiet down, and Texas Jack stood at the door, his eyes at the lookout, watching the Indian guard who was standing like a statue so near him.

The sobbing of the maiden soon ceased, for weary nature had caused her to drop off into a deep sleep.

The Texan's feet were hobbled together, and his hands were tied tightly behind his back, so that to free them seemed impossible.

There was a log wall dividing him from the next room, and a narrow doorway, over which hung a buffalo robe as a curtain.

The room he was in was used as a kitchen by the renegade chief, and the other was where he slept, kept his arms, and the trophies of the chase.

The maiden, Jack knew, also had her hands tied behind her back, so it did not seem that he could expect any help from her; but an idea flashed through his mind, and he determined to act upon it promptly.

Making his way into the next room, he cautiously aroused his fellow-captive.

"Oh! where am I?" she groaned.

"Sh! I am working a little plot to get out of this, and need your aid."

She was awake now, fully; and arose wearily, as she whispered in response:

"I will do all I can to aid you."

"Stand up and turn your back to mine."

She did so, and Texas Jack at once began to work at the thongs that bound her wrists.

His own hands were cramped with the buckskin strings about his wrists, and it was slow and painful work; but after a long while he managed to untie the knots, turning now and then to aid with his white, sharp teeth.

"Now you are free. Rub your hands so as to make the blood circulate, and begin on me," whispered Jack.

The young girl obeyed, and with nails, teeth, and fingers, worked steadily and untiringly until the ranchero had also free hands. Then it was but a little task for him to untie the thongs about his ankles.

"Why, how foolish I have been not to think of it," suddenly said the maiden.

"What?" asked Jack.

"That renegade chief hung your belt of arms upon the wall there," and gliding forward in the darkness, she the next instant returned with his revolvers and knife, which he seized eagerly.

"Now I'm fixed, for my rifle I left hanging on the saddle-horn."

"But do you intend to attempt to leave this camp?" asked the maiden.

"Indeed I do, and to take you with me. If we cannot find the Tonkaway, I can get two good ponies out of the Indian corral, and with several hours' start, they'll find it hard to catch us."

"But, that Indian guard?"

"Oh! he's wanted up in the happy hunting-grounds, and I intend to put him on the right trail to get there."

She shuddered, but said nothing; while Jack moved back into the next room, and cautiously peered through the lookout in the door.

As he did so, he saw a tall form coming directly toward the cabin.

The guard still stood where he had been when Jack last saw him, and his face was turned upon the one approaching him.

"I've got two to kill, if that fellow comes into this cabin," muttered Jack, drawing his knife across his palm, as though to feel its edge.

Straight up to the guard the new-comer walked, and Jack discovered that he wore the head-dress of a chief; but saw that it was not the renegade.

As he looked, to his surprise, just as he uttered some words in a low tone, he saw him grasp the throat of the guard, and then followed the sickening thud of a knife thrust through flesh and bone.

"The Tonkaway still lives!" cried Jack, throwing open the door, and suddenly confronting the new-comer, who was holding tightly in his arms the dying warrior, whose voice vainly strove to break forth in a warning whoop.

"The Red Snake is welcome," said Texas Jack, as the Tonkaway, disguised as a Comanche chief, now stepped toward him.

"More Comanche braves here?" asked the Tonkaway, as though thirsting for more worlds to conquer.

"No; but see! I am free, and I was just going to eat that Injun up when you came, Red Snake."

"Oh! you are a darling in red colors! But come, we must get out of this, as I don't believe Iron Arm will sleep a wink to-night, he will be so anxious about his captives."

Going back into the cabin, Jack found that the maiden had hunted about in the darkness until she had discovered some Indian toggery, and this both she and the ranchero hastily put on as a disguise.

Then they left the cabin, taking the course the Tonkaway had come, and without discovery reached the outer limits of the camp, Red Snake knowing just where the sentinels were placed, and leading the way between them without being seen.

Gaining the ridge leading to the cliff, they continued on their way until they reached the trail descending to the valley, and just then they heard a wild yell back in the Indian village.

"That's Iron Arm's sweet voice, and he has discovered our escape," coolly said Jack, supporting his fair companion, who suddenly leaned hard upon him, as though fearing the worst.

Instantly following, the wildest howls were heard up at the village, showing that the alarm was spreading, and the maiden murmured:

"Again we are lost!"

"On no, miss, for we have a good start, and the darkness will prevent their knowing which way we have gone—Ha!"

Just then they had reached the valley, and before them they heard voices, and quickly shrunk back into the shadow of some trees, for, advancing toward the trail leading up the side of the ridge, were three forms.

"They are the young braves sent out after the horses. Use your bow and arrows, Snake," whispered Jack, and with the last word a messenger of death was sent flying swiftly upon its course.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHASE.

THE first knowledge of the presence of foes which the three returning braves had, was to hear the twang of a bow-string, the whirr of an arrow, the thud, and one of their number sunk dead in his tracks.

The other two were young bucks, and being taken by surprise, bounded away like frightened deers, one of them to be overtaken by an arrow which wounded him, and brought him down; but springing to his feet, he was about to rush on after his flying comrade, when he beheld bounding toward him the tall form of the implacable Tonkaway.

He gave a shout of defiance, and tried to fit an arrow to his bow; but he was too late, for Red Snake was upon him, and a short, fierce struggle followed.

"Two more Comanche scalps," coolly said Red Snake, as Texas Jack and the maiden came up.

"Yes, you've got hair enough on this trip, Tonk, to start a hair-mattress shop; but, come, one of those fellows got away, and he'll soon have the whole tribe on our track."

"Where are the horses?"

"Red Snake find horses, was the quiet response, and he led the way across the valley to a thicket, where the three animals were lariatd out, having enjoyed a rest, and a few hours' pull at the rich grass which grew in abundance about them.

The yelling at the village of the Comanches

was still kept up, increasing in volume as the Indians worked themselves into a greater fury, and Texas Jack knew well that warriors were then mounting in hot haste to surround the camp in pursuit.

So the horses were quickly saddled, and mounting, they set forth at a gallop, keeping along the base of the foot-hills, determined to strike the prairie at a point further up.

As for the maiden, she had regained her presence of mind the moment she was in the saddle, and, to prevent another *contretemps* of the kind which had caused their recapture in the afternoon, Texas Jack had put her upon Yellow Chief, while he rode the horse of the renegade.

As he had feared, soon behind them resounded the wild call of Iron Arm for his horse, and the animal at once wheeled to the rightabout and attempted to dart away.

But he found that he had not a helpless maiden upon his back, but a master, who dragged him back upon his haunches with a force that he could not resist, and then drove the spurs into his flanks in a manner that made him snort with pain, and be glad enough to hasten on after those he had attempted to desert.

"Thunderbolt make horse much scare," said the Tonkaway, with a grin, while the young girl remarked:

"You have conquered him, sir."

"I have at least set him to thinking," laughed Jack, and turning short off from the foot-hills, they struck out across the prairies.

"Now, why could not that moon have risen later?" queried Jack, as the moon suddenly sailed above the horizon of prairie, casting its silvery light over all.

"You think it will show the Comanches where we are?" asked the maiden.

"Undoubtedly; but we are splendidly mounted, and have little to fear," and at a sweeping gallop they held on, the horse of the renegade now and then making a halt to run back, but quickly checked by the ranchero, who each time taught him the lesson that he was master.

"Comanche come," suddenly said the Tonkaway, who had been glancing over his shoulder back toward the hills.

The ranchero and the maiden both glanced quickly behind them and beheld a dark, moving mass, coming directly upon their track, yet a long distance off.

"Yes, they have seen us and are pressing on in a hurry, and there are fully a hundred of them," coolly said Jack.

"Do you think it possible to escape them, sir, for I would rather die than fall into the hands of that wicked man again?" said the maiden.

"Oh, yes, with this start, and these horses, we should run them out of sight."

"Come, Tonk, let us drop that crowd, and then we can double on them, and have ample time to rest."

"Red Snake say yes," answered the Indian, and instantly the three horses were pressed into a run.

"Keep at it, old fellow, for we are leaving them," said Jack, after some time had passed, and it was evident that though their pursuers were pushing their horses hard, the fugitives were gaining upon them.

"Can our horses stand this killing pace?" asked the maiden.

"Yellow Chief and the Tonkaway's horse can, miss, and from the way this animal I ride runs, I think he has plenty of wind, while he certainly is very fast."

"We evidently could not have gotten three faster animals together; but see, the Comanches are no longer visible, and when we strike yonder stream ahead, we will come a dodge on them," and Jack pointed to a dark line of timber half a mile ahead, which he knew fringed the banks of a small stream.

"Which way, Tonk?" he asked, as they neared the timber.

"Down-stream," was the laconic reply.

"And so on round through the Tiger country?" asked Jack, in a low tone.

"Yes."

"There is danger with the company we have, Tonk," and the ranchero nodded toward the maiden.

"Comanche think we no go that way, for we 'fraid chaparral tigers."

"They go up-stream, and we go down; leave water, and then go to ranch."

"You are right, Tonk, as you always are, for there is no need of going as far as the chaparrals, only far enough to throw the reds off our track."

"Here we are, and in we go."

Into the stream, which was very shallow, they plunged, and turning the heads of their horses down-stream, urged them along at a gallop for quite a distance, when they went at a slower pace.

For a couple of miles they kept to the water, and then leaving the stream, kept in the shadow of the timber for half an hour, when they boldly struck out upon the prairie once more, again pressing their animals into a run, for they had gained a temporary rest by the slow pace at which they had lately been going.

And thus on through the night they held

their hurried way, until at dawn they entered a clump of timber, and threw themselves from their panting horses.

"Now, miss, you can get some rest, and when you wake up, you shall have as good a breakfast as Tonkaway and myself can get for you," said Texas Jack.

But the worn-out girl had already dropped down upon the velvet grass, and sunk into an exhausted slumber.

"Poor girl, she has had a hard time of it, and I only wonder that she has not lost her reason," muttered Jack, as he unsaddled the horses and lariatd them out near by, while the Tonkaway climbed a tree to take a wide view of the prairie, as soon as the coming daylight would permit.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RETURN.

"*Por Dios!* My poor child is forever lost to me!"

The words came from the lips of Don Castro Rivera, some days after his return to his home, after having intrusted the rescue of his daughter wholly to Texas Jack the ranchero.

His hacienda was a massive structure, having once been an old Catholic mission, and was, although changed into the home of a ranchero, still known as the Mission San Juan.

It was a two-story, rambling building, with adobe walls, and the towers and turrets of the old chapel still towered over all, and could be seen far away off upon the prairie, a beacon of hope to the traveler, who was ever sure of a hospitable welcome beneath the roof of Don Rivera.

A walled garden surrounded it, with big-nonnias, orchids, and other creeping vines covering the walls, and china trees, cypress, and the towering cocoa-palm overshadowing all.

Then there were groves of lemon, orange, lime, guava, mango, and other fruit trees in abundance.

The windows of the *casa* were narrow, and barred with iron, giving it a prison-like look from without, though within all was luxury and comfort.

One wing of the hacienda, that occupied by the Don and his daughter, was surrounded by a second wall, the top of which was covered by a wild growth of prickly pear, which rendered it a barrier impossible for man to scale.

And this little garden of several acres, thus shut off for privacy, was an Eden of beauty, for it was filled with flowers and delicious fruits, with shady nooks, arbors, and a crystal stream gliding through its midst.

Beyond this wing rises the chapel and the rest of the edifice, with a vast *patio*, or courtyard, and innumerable rooms opening upon it.

Passing out of the immense iron gate, past a *portero*, who sits there smoking his *shuck cigarrito*, we find ourselves in the grounds about the *casa*, and which are also walled in.

Here are at one side extensive stables and outbuildings where the *vagueros*, or cowboys, have their abode, and surrounding them are groves of pomegranates, oranges, lemons and guavas.

Within the stables are numerous horses of pure breed, and without the walls, roaming the prairies, are vast herds of cattle that form the wealth of Don Rivera.

Innumerable servants are in the *patio* to attend to the slightest wish of their master, while within the wing devoted to himself and daughter Don Castro Rivera has every luxury that heart could desire.

When uttering the remark that opens this chapter, Don Rivera was standing upon the turreted top of his hacienda, gazing, as he had done hour after hour, far off over the prairies in the direction from whence he expected that Texas Jack would return.

"No, no, my beautiful child is lost! lost!"

"*Los Indos* have met the Texan and killed him, and *diablos!* they have my poor Rena in their power."

"Oh! curses upon them! but I will devote my life to avenging her—Ah! what is that I see?"

He strained his eyes far across the prairie, and, as his face flushed, he cried:

"There is some excitement yonder! See! my men are rushing toward a given point, and now they halt and wave their hats."

"Yes, they come this way."

"Now, as the dust lifts I see—I see! oh, God in heaven! I see my child!"

The strong man fairly shrieked the last words, and clasping his hands he dropped upon the stone roof, and his lips moved in prayer.

Springing to his feet he again gazed out upon the prairie.

"Yes, it is my beautiful Rena that is coming back to me, and by her side rides that prince of Texans, whom men call The Thunderbolt."

"Ah! and that Indian—his friend, the Tonkaway—rides upon the other side of Rena, while my gallant herders are dashing out to intercept them."

"Bravo! Bravo! my gallant Texas Jack! you have kept your pledge," shouted Don Castro, as the Texan, the maiden and the Tonkaway dashed under the walls of the hacienda, followed

by a score of cowboys who had been herding upon the prairies, and seeing them, joined them, while they made the air ring with their wild yells of joy.

CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

HASTENING from the roof to the patio of the hacienda, Don Rivera sprung forward, just as Texas Jack lifted the maiden from her saddle, and clasped her in his arms, while he cried in thrilling tones of joy:

"Back to my heart again, my beautiful Rena."

To his dismay his daughter did not return his embrace, but releasing herself, while her beautiful face flushed and paled by turns, she said:

"Oh, senor, I am not your daughter."

"You are not my daughter?" gasped Don Rivera, looking at her with a glance of commingled pain and dismay.

"No, senor," was the firm reply.

"You are not the Senorita Rivera?" asked the Don, in a whisper.

"I am not, sir, and I regret to give you this pain; but surely you should know your daughter well enough to see that I am wholly a different person."

This was spoken in a kind, yet firm tone, and the maiden looked the Don squarely in the face.

"Good God! her sufferings have driven her mad," cried the Mexican, in a quivering voice, turning his gaze upon Texas Jack, who looked on with amazement, as did also the several servants who had congregated there to welcome back their young mistress.

"I fear so, sir, and God knows I do not wonder at it," Texas Jack sadly answered.

"Pardon, senors, but I am not mad, though I do wonder that I have my reason, after all that I have gone through; but I am not the Senorita Rivera, senor."

The Don stepped closer to the maiden and gazing into her face most earnestly, said, thoughtfully:

"No, there can be no mistake; for you are my child that I had given up as lost to me forever."

"When did you see your daughter last, senor?" asked the maiden.

"Not one week ago."

The maiden started, and then asked:

"And I am so like her?"

"You are my poor Rena."

"No, senor, I am not your daughter; but how did she leave you?"

"She rode out upon the prairies and was captured by the Comanches. Do you not remember, Rena?" and the Don looked piteously into the maiden's face.

"I, too, rode out upon the prairies, a week ago, senor, and I was captured by the Comanches, and rescued by this noble Texan and his Indian ally."

"Yes, yes; I pursued the *diablos Indos*, my child, and sought this brave man, the Senor Texas Jack, and he pledged me his word to bring you back, and he has done so."

"Oh, senor, there is some mystery in all this, for I repeat it, I am not the one you believe me, much as I may resemble her."

"You are, for you have her voice, her eyes, her face, her form, ay, the very riding-habit that she wore the day I saw her last. Come, my child; I know that you have suffered, and that all seems like a nightmare, like some hideous dream to you now; but soon all will come round well, and my little Rena will again sing as merrily as the birds in the garden, and forget all of her troubles. Come, my child," and Don Rivera would have led her away.

But she drew back from him, and answered firmly:

"Senor, why will you not believe me, when I tell you that I am not your daughter? Do you, sir, believe me to be the Senorita Rena?" and she turned to Texas Jack, who answered:

"I never saw that lady, miss, but once, and you certainly are the image of her."

"And your servants, senor—do they believe me to be your daughter?" and she turned to those who stood near.

Instantly Rena's old nurse stepped forward and gazed upon the young girl, and asserted, sadly:

"Yes, you are Senorita Rena; but, poor child, your head is not right now."

The maiden stamped her little foot impatiently, and said:

"This is remarkable; but I am not your daughter, senor. Ah! now I recall it, the renegade chief called me Rena Rivera, and said that he had had me captured to avenge himself upon me for discarding his love. I laughed at him at first, and then I deemed him mad, and fled from him—and oh! to what a fate would I have not gone but for you, senor," and she turned to Jack, while Don Rivera, also turning to him, asked:

"Did she say she was not my daughter, Senor Jack, while you were coming here?"

"No, sir, but then we were pressed too hard to have much to say; but I do recall that she asked me to let her leave me at our last camping place, and I wondered at it, and thought her

mind wandering, so told her we would soon be in safety; but can there be no mistake, sir?"

"None, senor; she is my child," firmly declared the Don.

"Pardon me, Don Rivera, but is there nothing about your daughter by which you could prove that I am not mad, or trying to deceive you?"

"How mean you?" sadly asked the Don.

"Her saddle, that she rode away with, for instance, for mine is upon the horse I rode back. Then, too, her dress, her jewels—see—did your daughter have jewels like these?"

She drew off her gauntlet gloves, as she spoke, and displayed her fingers full of rings with precious stones.

The Don seized her hand, and cried, eagerly:

"No, not one of these jewels belonged to my child, but—"

"The saddle is not the one on which the Senorita Rena rode away, senor," said a servant, entering the patio at that moment.

A deathlike silence fell upon all.

Could it mean that this girl, the image of Rena Rivera, was indeed another person?

Just then the old nurse stepped closely up to the maiden and touched her ear, while she said, in a low tone:

"Senor, this senorita wears ear-rings, and the Senorita Rena never had her ears pierced."

To her side, then, sprung Don Rivera, and then he tottered backward, crying:

"Holy Mother! She tells the truth—this is not my child, Texas Jack, though God knows she is her living image!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MYSTERIOUS GUEST.

It was certainly a hard matter for Don Castro Rivera to be brought to believe that the maiden before him was really not his own daughter.

The Senorita Rena Rivera had ridden out upon the prairies, as was often her wont, and a party of cowboys had seen her captured by a band of Comanche Indians.

The Don had given chase, and had, when finding that they were making for their stronghold in the mountains, sought the aid of Texas Jack, the ranchero, and that gallant young prairie man had boldly invaded the Indian country and rescued a maiden whom he had believed to be the one whose life he had saved upon a former occasion.

Now this maiden, found just where it was natural to suppose the Don's daughter would be, boldly asserted that she was not Rena Rivera.

The very image of her, her form the same in size and willowy grace, and dressed in a habit that certainly looked like that worn by the kidnapped maiden, yet denying that she was the daughter of Don Castro, and having certain proofs that she was not.

All this, with the dreaded fate that might have overtaken his daughter, nearly drove the Don wild, and he walked off to his library in no enviable frame of mind.

"Come, senorita, let us follow him, and there solve this mystery, for, if you are not, as you say, and I now almost believe, the Senorita Rena, then I must take some steps for her rescue at once," and Texas Jack led the fair stranger after the Don.

As they reached the library they found him about to return to them, having partially regained control of himself, and seeing them he said in a voice that trembled:

"Pardon my rudeness, senorita, and you, senor, but I am wholly unnerved at this fall from joy to despair; but you are my guests, and I will do all that I can for you."

"No, Don Rivera, I must take the trail to find your daughter, and I will be off as soon as my horse, and the animal of the Tonkaway, have rest."

"Thank you, my noble friend; but you need rest yourself, and food, and my servants shall look to your comfort, and to yours, senorita, for though you be not my child, you are so like her that you have a warm place in my heart, and most gladly would I have you remain with me, if you have not other friends to whom you can go."

"I thank you, senor, but I have other friends who look for me as anxiously as do you for your daughter. I was captured by the Comanches, while riding alone upon the prairies, and there seems no doubt, from what occurred in the Indian camp, but that I was mistaken by the Indians for your daughter. To this brave senor I owe my escape, and in my heart I thank him for my life, and for my rescue from a cruel fate, and I feel that he will bring you tidings of the Senorita Rena if mortal man can do so."

Texas Jack blushed like a school-boy at the warm words of praise of the maiden, and said bluntly:

"I rescued you, miss, for the Senorita Rena, but I am glad for your own sake that I was able to do so. Now, let me offer my services to conduct you to your home, whenever you desire to return to your friends, though I would advise, as you are nearly worn out, that you permit me to inform them of your safety, while you remain as the Don's guest for some days."

Across the maiden's pale face came a flush, as she replied:

"Thank you, sir; but if Don Rivera will permit me a few days' enjoyment of his hospitality I will accept it, and if you will lend me the animal I rode here, I will return to my friends without troubling you any more, and your horse I will send back to you."

"The horse was Iron Arm's, miss, and you can have him; but I advise you not to go alone to your home."

"My house is open to you, senorita, as long as you please to remain, and my stable is at your service, while, when you are ready to return to your friends, I will escort you there, with a guard of my gallant cowboys," said Don Rivera.

Texas Jack noticed a slight smile cross the face of the young girl, which he could not understand, but she thanked the Don for his kind offer, and then turned to follow a servant who led her to her room.

"Well, Senor Texas Jack, what do you make of all this?" asked the Don, when the two were alone together.

"It is most mysterious, sir, and I intend to solve the mystery, for I noticed that that young lady did not frankly tell who she was, or in any way account for herself, while she certainly is the living image of your daughter, as I remember her."

"She certainly is, and I did not deem it possible for two persons to be so alike, though I am now convinced that she is not my child; but, oh, senor, where is my poor, poor Rena?"

"Don Rivera, that I shall soon know, for I will at once start upon the trail, as every moment is precious; but I must ask of you two of your best horses for myself and the Tonkaway."

"You shall have them, and there are no better animals on the prairie than those I can mount you on—but, by the way, what was the color of the horse ridden by my fair and mysterious guest, for poor Rena rode away a snow-white?"

"Another proof then, sir, that this lady is not your daughter, for she was not mounted upon a white horse, nor was there any animal of that kind ridden by any of the Indians who captured her; but, I will get off as soon as you order our horses, sir."

"But you need rest, senor?"

"No, I am seldom tired; but I wish to know the favorite rides of your daughter, where she was last seen, and when, and then the Tonkaway and myself are ready for the trail."

The Don at once led Texas Jack into the dining-room, where a most tempting meal was served, and then the servants and cowboys were all summoned and questioned regarding when and where the Senorita Rena was last seen.

Having gleaned what information he could, and well mounted and equipped for his trip, Texas Jack rode out of the hacienda walls with Red Snake by his side, and took a course leading toward the Staked Plain.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE TIGERS.

WITH the slight clew he could obtain from the servants, who had seen the Senorita Rena Rivera ride away from the hacienda, Texas Jack set to work to solve the mystery of her disappearance.

Reaching the spot upon the prairie where she had been last seen by a peon, he looked about and found there the tracks of her horse, though the days that had passed since her departure left them very obscure indeed.

"Now, Tonk, for a big talk," said Texas Jack, staking his horse out and calling to Red Snake, who followed the example of his pale-face comrade and friend, and came and sat down upon the grass by the side of the ranchero.

"Me hear," he said simply.

"Well, we have been barking up the wrong tree, Tonk!"

"Ugh!"

"In other words, we rescued the wrong girl."

"Me hear."

"We struck a blind trail."

"Ugh!"

"I am glad we got that pretty little girl out of a bad scrape; but we have now to get the Senorita Rena out of a fix."

"Ranchero speak straight."

"We've got to go straight, Tonk, for I have given my word to the Don to rescue his daughter."

"Keep um, too."

"Or we will know her fate, Tonk."

"Guess so."

"And make hair fly if harm has befallen her."

"Get much scalps!"

"We will; but what is to be done?"

"Trail there," and the Indian pointed to the trail.

"But very faint, Tonk."

"It good."

"Well, where does it lead?"

"Llano Estacado."

"To the Staked Plain you think?"

"Ugh."

"It certainly goes in that direction, and she

may have fallen into the hands of the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain."

"May be; but them pale-face."

"So is Iron Arm, the renegade chief of the Comanches, and the poor girl might have as soon looked for mercy from the Chaparral Tigers, as from him."

"Ugh," said Red Snake, not wholly mastering the words of the ranchero.

"Now, Tonk, we will be off and push on until night, and then camp on the trail."

"Red Snake ready," was the calm response, and leading his horse, an elegant animal, for the Don had mounted the ranchero and the Indian with the best his stable afforded, the Tonkaway set off on foot, slowly following the time-worn trail, while Texas Jack came on behind, his eyes also bent upon the faint signs by which Rena Rivera was to be tracked.

Until the gathering shadows forced them to halt, the two continued on their way, and then they camped in a small clump of timber, and after a substantial supper, were glad enough to seek rest, which they so much needed.

Not a sound disturbed their slumbers through the night, and at the first glimmer of day they were awake and preparing breakfast.

The meal over, they pushed on through the timber, to come to a sudden halt, while Texas Jack threw himself from the saddle, the red-skin being already on foot.

"Ugh!" said Tonkaway.

"Yes, Tonk, there has been trouble here, for the horse ridden by the senorita was certainly caught here with a lariat, for there is where he bounded to one side, and here is where he was checked by the rope, while the man who threw it stood behind that large tree."

"More tracks, too," quickly said the Tonkaway, pointing to other hoof-marks further away.

"Yes, and they are shed?"

"Chaparral Tigers!"

"You are right, Tonk, and they will hold the girl for a large ransom from her father, for I cannot believe that they will harm her, or kill her."

"Much bad pale-face!"

"You are right. They are a hard lot, and equal to any crime; but I believe it is gold they want by kidnapping Miss Rivera, and if I have my way they'll get lead instead."

"Come, Tonk, get on your horse, for we can follow the trail rapidly now."

The Indian threw himself upon the back of his horse, and at a swift pace the two animals were urged forward upon the trail, which was now, with the hoof-marks of half a dozen extra horses added to it, plainly visible to the practiced eyes of the ranchero and his red-skin companion.

The trail led them directly toward the dense chaparrals, which the Texan knew were upon the river above, and Jack became more and more convinced that the maiden had fallen into the hands of the Tigers of the Chaparral—a band of Mexican outlaws who had long been the scourge of the prairies and all rancheros settling near them.

Often had Texas Jack come in contact with prowling members of the band, and the Tigers had been worsted, so that they had good reason to know him; and once, to avenge their comrades, had made a midnight raid upon his lone ranch.

But, aided by the Tonkaway, and his negro, Ebony, Jack had given them a reception that beat them off, and so hotly followed up his advantage that they had not time to run off his ponies and cattle.

Of course he knew that they had sworn to kill him, but this had no weight with him when bent on duty, as he then was, and in so good a cause as the rescue of the poor Senorita Rena Rivera.

To invade the chaparrals, where the Man Tigers had their lair, Jack and the Tonkaway both knew well was to take desperate chances; but they had struck the trail; they were aware that it led to the dens of their foes, as bitter foes as were the Comanches, and yet they were not men to turn back.

"We are in for it, Tonk," said Jack.

"Yes, much hot time," was the laconic response of the Tonkaway, as he rode by the side of the ranchero.

Halting for a rest, in a *motte* just in sight of the chaparrals, the Tonkaway, who went to stake out the horses, while Jack got dinner, suddenly gave a call that took the ranchero quickly to his side.

"What is it, Tonk?"

"Ugh! much hot time here!" was the answer, as Red Snake stood pointing at the ground, where were signs of a struggle and red marks that looked like blood-stains.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HAUNT OF THE TIGERS.

"YES, Tonk, there has been hot work here, as you say, and we must find out what was the matter," and Texas Jack closely scanned the ground.

"Find him out all right," assured Red Snake,

and he set to work to discover every trace that could throw light upon the matter.

For a long time both the ranchero and the red-skin silently searched the *motte* and its surroundings, and at last as though they had arrived at some conclusion, they moved toward the spot where they were to camp, and Red Snake began to build a fire.

Having done this, the provisions were gotten out, and the two sat down to eat their dinner, Jack, knowing the Indian's habits, making no remark of what discovery had been made by either of them.

A pipe followed the meal, and then Texas Jack said:

"The Tigers, who made the girl captive, had a fight here in this *motte*, Tonk."

"Yes," was the response of the Tonkaway.

"Soldiers, Comanches, or cowboys attacked them?"

Red Snake shook his head.

"Who then?"

"Come from *Llano Estacado*."

"So I discovered, and they must therefore have been the Wild Riders."

Red Snake simply nodded.

"How many, Tonk?"

The Indian held up three fingers of his right hand.

"Yes, that was the number of tracks I discovered, and the Tigers were six."

"Yes, and young squaw."

"Six Tigers and their captive, yes; but the Wild Riders attacked them?"

"Yes; kill three."

"Ah! how know you this?"

"One Wild Rider killed."

"Indeed! Then you have discovered more than I have."

"Three Tigers, one Wild Rider in grove over there," and the red-skin pointed to a thicket which he had searched most thoroughly.

"And who took the girl, Tonk?"

"Go on to chaparral."

"With Tigers?"

"Yes."

"That is bad, for I would rather trust to the Wild Riders, who, if they are outlaws, are by no means the black-hearted wretches that the Tigers of the Chaparral are."

"Wild Rider much bad, Tiger much worse than Comanche," was the Tonkaway's criticism upon the two bands of outlaws.

"Well, we must push on for the chaparral as soon as it is dark, and see if we can find the lair of the Tigers."

The Tonkaway nodded assent, and then the two arose and went carefully over the ground together, revealing to each other the discoveries they had made, and arriving at the conclusion that three of the outlaw band, known as the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain, had come upon the desperadoes known as the Chaparral Tigers, who held Donna Rivera captive, and had boldly attacked them.

That the Wild Riders had made their foes suffer, there was no doubt; but the trail of Rena Rivera's horse went on with the Tigers toward the chaparral, so it was natural to suppose that they had held possession of the fair captive, while their foes fled in a northerly direction toward the Staked Plain.

But yet there were the tracks of three horses forming the trail of the Wild Riders, though one of the trio lay buried in the *motte*, and this neither Texas Jack or the Tonkaway could find a solution for, other than that the steed of their dead comrade had followed on after his mates.

The tracks left by the Tigers toward the chaparral were six in number, and a dead horse, with a bullet in his brain, lying in the *motte*, plainly showed what had become of the seventh.

As the tracks of Rena Rivera's horse, now so well known to the two trailers, led on toward the chaparral, they could but follow the Tigers' trail; and as soon as it grew twilight, Texas Jack and the Tonkaway mounted and pressed on their way.

A ride of some miles brought the chaparral, dark and dismal, before them.

They knew well its dangers, not only from the outlaw band that had their den in its fastnesses, but also from the brute tigers, scarcely more ferocious than their human namesakes, who had their haunts in the dense retreat.

Narrow bridle-paths only penetrated the thorny jungle here and there, and to one unacquainted with the chaparral, death must certainly follow close upon the heels of the bold invader of the thorny thicket.

But Texas Jack had before been through the chaparral, and the Tonkaway had once made it his home, when hiding from his Comanche foes, so that they boldly rode along its dark and thorny walls, seeking an inlet into the dreary, desolate interior.

The scream of the chaparral tiger now and then came to their ears, making no impression upon their stout hearts, though their horses became wild with nervous fear of the danger before them.

"There is a path leading in at yonder tree," said Jack, pointing to a tree that soared above its companions.

"Red Snake know him."

"I guess it is the one used by the Man Tigers, Tonk."

"Yes, him the one."

A few moments brought them to the tree, and Texas Jack turned his horse into a narrow, arched passageway into the dense thicket.

The wild scream of a tiger greeted them just then, as though in warning, and the animal ridden by the ranchero reared and plunged in terror; but the firm voice of his rider, and the severe application of the spurs, forced him into the dark recess, whither the Tonkaway closely followed him, and the invasion of the chaparral, the haunt of the human and brute tigers, was begun.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

ONLY a few rods had the ranchero penetrated into the darkness and danger of the chaparral, when a wild scream was heard just ahead.

"The tigers are abroad in force to-night, Tonk," said Jack, coolly.

"Make much noise; fight, too," responded the Tonkaway, and just then, as though to prove that the Indian had not belied the tiger nature, a huge yellow ball, as it appeared, dropped from a tree overhead, and fell directly upon the head and neck of the horse ridden by the ranchero.

By some strange freak, for it is not usual with their kind, the savage beast had dropped upon the horse instead of the rider, and fastened his teeth and claws into the throat and neck of the doomed animal.

A savage growl, a tearing of flesh and crunching of bones, a wild, almost human shriek from the poor horse, and steed, rider and tiger went down upon the earth.

Texas Jack was unhurt, and could have emptied his revolver into the glossy hide of the savage brute, but his presence of mind did not desert him, and he knew that he dared not fire a shot there, if he would not alarm the Man Tigers and bring them upon him.

So he drew his knife, and throwing himself upon the maddened brute, clinging to the throat of his struggling horse, he drove the keen blade deep down into the body of the tiger.

Smarting with pain the tiger turned upon his dangerous foe, to receive a stunning blow over the nose that momentarily dazed him; then Texas Jack seized the beast's throat in a clutch of iron, and once, twice, thrice, drove the blade home in the body.

The real chaparral tigers are hard to kill, and so Jack found it with this one, for he received an ugly blow from his paw, and got a gash in his arm, from the sharp claws, before the brute dropped dead at his feet.

"Much big fight. Pale-face great chief," cried the Tonkaway, coming up, his knife in hand.

"I've killed *el tigre*, Tonk, but he has done for my horse," rejoined Jack.

"Yes, horse much dead. Ranchero ride my pony; Red Snake walk."

"We may both walk before we get out of this, Tonk; but let me put this poor fellow out of his misery."

The knife sunk deep into the side of the tiger's victim, and with a quiver the life of the noble steed had ended.

"Sh!" warned Jack, as a sound came to his ears.

But the Tonkaway had already heard it, and stood on the alert.

The screams of other tigers were heard far off in the chaparral, but these were unheeded now, for the sound that came to the ears of the two adventurous trailers was the hoof-fall of a horse approaching.

Shrinking back into the dark undergrowth, the ranchero and the red-skin waited, while the horse came on at a rapid walk.

Nearer and nearer he approached, until he snorted as he drew close to the spot where the dead horse and tiger lay.

"*Mil demonios!*" cried a voice, in Spanish, as he urged his horse forward; but the animal refused to move, and the rider called out:

"Ho, Luis! Are you there?"

"Si," answered Texas Jack, in a faint voice.

"I feared it was you that the tiger had sprung on. Are you much hurt, *camarada*?"

"Oh, si!" cried Jack, and then he added in Spanish, which he spoke well:

"Come to me, *camarada*."

With an oath at his horse, the man dismounted, and fastening the animal securely, he came slowly forward in the darkness.

First he stumbled over the dead body of the tiger, and again gave vent to his:

"*Mil demonios!*"

Then he went sprawling over the dead horse, and this time cried:

"*Carajo!* the tiger has killed your horse, you have killed the tiger, and now where, and how are you, Luis?"

"I am not Luis, senor, but one I like better," said Texas Jack, seizing the surprised man in a clutch which he could not shake off, while the Tonkaway tied him with a rapidity that was remarkable.

"*Madre de Dios!* who are you?" gasped the frightened man.

"Men call me Texas Jack," was the quiet reply.

"*Caramba!* I am a dead man," was the disconsolate exclamation.

"You are if you raise your voice above a whisper, and do not do as I tell you. Now, who are you?"

"A poor devil of a Mexican, *senor.*"

"On Texan soil, but for what purpose?"

"Hunting cattle the *demonios* Gringos stole from me."

"Go lightly on demon Yankees, as you call them, *senor*, for I am under that head; but you have lost no stock, for you never had any that you did not steal, and your haunt is in this chaparral, for you are a Man Tiger."

The man crossed himself and uttered a prayer against being aught so vile; but Texas Jack continued:

"Who is this Luis you supposed me to be?"

"My comrade, *senor.*"

"Another Man Tiger?"

"Oh, no, *Senor Texan*, we are honest Mexicans."

"Where is Luis?"

"I expected to find him near the opening of the trail leading into the chaparral."

"Ah! he is doubtless on guard there, and you were going to relieve him."

The Mexican made no reply, and Texas Jack continued:

"Come, we will go and look up the *Senor Luis*, and then we'll have a little talk all together."

"Luis was not at the entrance when we came in, but he may have ridden off a little distance."

"See if you can find him, *Tonk*, while I come on with this gentleman and his horse, which I shall need."

The Tonkaway at once disappeared, while Texas Jack unfastened the Mexican's horse, and taking his saddle and bridle from his own dead animal, slowly followed the Indian with the animals and the prisoner.

He had gone but a short distance when he heard a savage growl, followed by a yelp of pain, and then came the call of a chaparral night-bird.

"The Tonkaway has found your comrade, *senor*, for that is the signal," said Jack, and hastening on, they came out of the chaparral at the place where they had entered it half an hour before.

"Well, *Tonk*?"

"Tiger Man dead; most eat by tiger beast."

Jack saw the half-devoured form of a human being lying near, and by his side a huge tiger which the Tonkaway had killed by sending an arrow into his heart.

"Your comrade died on duty, *senor*, and was doubtless caught unawares by his brute namesake springing upon him; but we did not see him when we entered the chaparral."

"Poor Luis!" muttered the Mexican.

"Was he mounted?"

"Yes, *senor*; his horse is there."

The Tonkaway went to the spot indicated, and soon returned, leading the dead man's horse.

"Now, *senor*, you are a Man Tiger, you say?"

"I did not say so, *senor.*"

"Well, I know that you are, and if you wish to save your neck now for the gallows hereafter, you'll tell the truth: if not, you will wish that you had met Luis's fate. So tell me: has the Tiger King, as they call your chief, a lady captive in his lair?"

The Mexican seemed to have made up his mind that all denials as to who he was were useless, so said frankly:

"He has not, *senor.*"

"Are you sure of this?"

"I am, *senor.*"

"Did not he kidnap the daughter of a *hacienda* some days ago?"

"Yes, *senor.*"

"Ah! and brought her here to the chaparral?"

"He did not, *senor.*"

"Then where did he take her?"

"He was bringing her here, *senor*, when we were attacked by the Wild Rider Chief and two of his men, and they took her from us."

"Indeed! Were you of the party?"

"Yes, *senor.*"

"How many were there with you?"

"Seven, with our chief; but he left us before we came near the chaparral, and ordered poor Luis to bring the *senorita* on to the lair."

"Tell the rest of the story."

"We were encamped in a *motte* some leagues away, when the Wild Riders dashed in upon us, killed three of our men, and seizing the *senorita*, rode off with her. One of the Riders we killed, but they had long-range rifles and we dared not follow them, so buried the dead and came on to the chaparral."

"This seems like a straight story; but what horse did the *senorita* ride when the Wild Riders carried her off?"

"She rode the horse of the Wild Rider we killed, and the animal she had ridden while with us, we brought on to the lair with us."

"Ah! now where did your chief go?"

"Over toward the Rio Grande, *senor.*"

"Is he in the lair now?"

"No, *senor.*"

"Well, I believe you have told the truth; but I will take you with me for the present. You can ride your own horse, and I will mount that of your dead comrade, Luis."

"Whither do you go, *senor*?"

"That you will find out. Come, *Tonk*; follow on with this man, and I will ride on ahead, as we skirt the chaparral," said Texas Jack, and throwing his saddle and bridle upon the horse of the dead Mexican, he rode on, while the Tonkaway, having securely bound the prisoner to his steed, followed slowly behind.

Just as the Texan moved away, the moon soared up above the prairie horizon, and in gazing at its beauty as he rode along, he failed to see a horseman ride out from the shadow of the chaparral and confront him.

Then, suddenly came the command:

"Hold! I am the Man Tigers' King and you are my prisoner!"

Texas Jack reined his horse quickly back, and dropped his hand upon his revolver; but as the King of the Chaparral Tigers had spoken a dark form glided out from the thicket behind the *ranchero*, and sent his lariat whirling over the head and shoulders of the Texan, pinioning his arms to his side.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RECOGNITION.

TEXAS JACK was certainly caught unawares by the horseman who confronted him so unexpectedly, and the man on foot who had so skillfully caught him in the coil of the lasso.

He well knew that in the deeper recesses of the chaparral the outlaw band of Man Tigers had their lair; but having captured their guard and seen another dead, slain by the wild beasts, he did not expect to find others in that immediate vicinity.

The truth is that the Tigers of the Chaparral had two passes guarded, and their sentinels stood but a few hundred yards apart.

The prisoner knew this, and relied upon the other sentinel to kill Texas Jack and the Indian when they rode upon him, not knowing of his presence there, and he intended to cry out and give warning to his companion in the nick of time.

But the Texan had ridden on ahead, leaving the Tonkaway to follow with his prisoner, and this had thwarted the captive's little plan for his escape, and the death or capture of his captors.

A few minutes before Jack was so unwarily brought to a halt, a single horseman had come from across the prairie to the edge of the chaparral, and been promptly halted by the sentinel on duty with:

"Halt! who comes?"

"The Tiger King," was the reply, and by the light of the rising moon the outlaw recognized his chief, as well as by his voice, and the reply.

"Advance, *senor chief*," he answered.

"Ho, Manuel, I am glad to see you on the alert, for a band of Gringo soldiers may be sent after us, since our capture of that rich Don's daughter."

"But is all well in the lair?" asked the horseman, riding up to the edge of the chaparral, where stood the sentinel, with his horse back in the dark passageway that penetrated the thicket.

"Yes, *senor*, but I think something is wrong up at Luis's stand, for I have heard strange sounds there, as though the tigers were making it warm for him, and afterward came the sound of voices."

"Ha! say you so, Manuel! We must look to this; but these tigers are getting strangely savage of late, and I have feared they would attack the men; but the voices were doubtless the guard relieving Luis, if he is on duty."

"No, *senor*, it is hardly time for the relief—Ah! there comes a horseman, and the moonlight will show us whether it is Luis or not."

"Back into the shadow there, Manuel, and stand ready with your lariat," cried the chief, in a whisper, while he drew his own horse back to a secure retreat.

"It is a stranger; stand ready, Manuel," called out the Tiger King as Texas Jack drew nearer.

A moment after came the halt, the throwing of the lariat, and Texas Jack was a prisoner, the Tiger King spurring to his side, while his arms were pinioned, and leveling a revolver in his face.

"You will not force me to kill you, *senor*!" he said, sternly.

"Oh, no, as you have the drop on me, and some one of your band certainly has me fast," was the cool reply of Texas Jack, while Manuel, still holding hard on the lariat, came forward, and with a few rapid twists of the rope had his prisoner secure.

"Who are you, *senor*?" asked the chief.

"A Texan."

"That is evident; but what is your name, and what are you doing here?"

"That I will tell you when you take me to your camp," said Jack, anxious to be carried

away from the spot, as he feared the Tonkaway might walk into the trap too in which he had been caught.

"Are you alone?"

"You see that I am, *senor.*"

"Well, lead his horse on to the lair, Manuel, as soon as I have blindfolded him," said the chief, and taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he bound it tightly over the eyes of his prisoner.

The sentinel then led the way into the thorny-walled pathway, the Tiger King bringing up the rear, and saying:

"Leave your horse here, Manuel, for you must return at once to your post."

"Yes, *senor.*"

Jack gave a sigh of relief as they moved on into the chaparral without seeing or suspecting the presence of the Tonkaway.

After a ride of perhaps half a mile they came to a halt, and the Tiger King said:

"I will take care of the prisoner now, Manuel, and you return to the outpost, and give the signal at once if you discover anything suspicious."

"Yes, *senor*; but about Luis?"

"The relief will see if anything is wrong there when it goes around."

"Yes, *senor chief*," and Manuel disappeared, while the Tiger King led the Texan through a passageway; and, pressing the walls with his shoulders as he went by, Jack felt that they were of rock, and knew that he was in a cavern.

Presently the chief halted, and a hum of voices ceased, while a glare before his eyes convinced the Texan that he was standing in a bright light.

"Welcome, *senor chief*," cried a voice, and a score of others repeated the words, while the Tiger King said quietly:

"Thank you, my braves; but I have a prisoner here I caught at the edge of the chaparral."

With this he took the handkerchief from off the face of his prisoner, and a number of voices cried out quickly:

"Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TIGER KING AT HOME.

AS soon as Texas Jack's eyes became accustomed to the light, he discovered that he was in a large natural chamber in a pile of rocks, which nature and man's skill, had made into a fort, a stronghold.

Upon the walls, were several flaring lights, and about the chamber were bunks rudely made, and in the center a large table, around which the men had been seated, when the chief and his prisoner entered, playing cards.

A score of men were present, and a rough-looking, evil-faced lot, dressed in the Mexican garb, and evidently, with one or two exceptions, natives of Mexico.

They were all thoroughly armed, and Texas Jack realized fully his danger in being at the mercy of the Tigers of the Chaparral.

"Ah! say you so, my bravos, that this is the famous prairie man whom they call Texas Jack!" cried the Tiger King, when his men recognized the Texan and addressed him by name.

"Yes, *senor chief*; that is Texas Jack, and the wonder is that you were able to take him, for he is a terror in a fight," said a tall man, stepping forward, and who was one of the exceptions as to being a Mexican, for he was evidently an American.

"You know him well then, Lone Star?"

"Yes, chief, I know him so well that he marked me for life, for you see this scar," and the man showed a scar across his forehead, evidently the mark of where a bullet had cut its way.

"Hullo, Dick Turpin, is that you?"

"I thought I had killed you two years ago," said Texas Jack, in the most off-hand way, as he recognized the man whom the Tigers called Lone Star.

"No, Texas Jack, you did not kill me, though you well-nigh did so."

"Well, I trust for better luck next time, Dick Turpin, for you are certainly the most red-handed cut-throat I ever trilled upon the prairies."

"The next time will never come for you, Texas Jack, for you are in the hands of men who neither ask nor give quarter."

"This is not the first time I have been in a tight place, Dick Turpin, and I guess it won't be the last," was the cool reply.

The Tiger King had been gazing upon the handsome, daring face of Texas Jack with evident admiration, and now said:

"*Senor*, you have been the bitter foe of my band, but I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before face to face. I am glad to know you, *Senor Texan*."

"It is more than I can say for you, chief. But come; what are you going to do with me?" was the Texan's blunt response.

"First tell me, what were you doing in the neighborhood of this chaparral?"

Without an instant's hesitation, and trusting to luck as was often his wont, Jack replied:

"I was seeking for the King of the Man Tigers."

"Ah! you confess that you were trying to kill me?" and the chief's face flushed angrily.

"I confess that I would like to rid the country of a man so vile, but I did not say that that was the purpose of my present coming to your neighborhood."

"Ah, may I ask why you came, then?"

"Yes; I came on a mission of importance."

"And that is?"

"To strike a trade with you."

"A trade?"

"Yes, chief. You have a prisoner I wish to purchase from you."

"Senor, you are mistaken, for the Tigers never take prisoners, you being the only exception."

"Oh, I know that you are well named after the chaparral tigers; but then in this case you have a captive whom I have now come to trade for."

"Pray name him, senor."

"It is a lady."

"Hail the Donna Rivera?" cried the chief, quickly.

"Yes, that lady."

"She is my captive, and it will take a large sum to ransom her."

"Name the sum, chief."

"It will be a large one, for I shall include your price in the exchange, you being also in my power."

"Name the price, chief," reiterated Texas Jack, indifferently.

"Pardon, senor chief, but the lady you speak of is not our captive," said Lone Star, stepping forward.

Like a madman the Tiger King turned upon him and cried:

"Caramba! what do you mean, man?"

"Senor chief, after you left the party at the *motte*, a band of Wild Riders attacked Paulo and his party, and took the lady from them."

"Por Dios! is this true?" and the chief turned white with rage.

"It is, senor chief, and Paulo lost three of his men, shot down by the Wild Riders."

"Curse the men! And the girl was carried off by those Staked Plain devils?"

"Yes, senor chief."

"Paulo shall suffer for this, for he should have kept the girl at all hazards. How many Wild Riders were there?"

"I do not know, senor, but there must have been a large force to get the best of Paulo and his men."

"There was, senor chief, a large force, for I was one of Paulo's men," said a Mexican, stepping forward with a ready lie upon his lips.

"I should have come on to the lair with you; but I had duty that called me over on the Rio Grande, and certainly suspected no danger that near the chaparrals; but I shall wrest my captive from those Wild Riders, and until then our negotiations fall through, senor," and the Tiger King turned to Texas Jack, who had listened to all that had been said with considerable interest.

"As you please, chief; but I fear you will find it a big undertaking, to take the lady from the Wild Riders."

"I know their force, and I can readily bring to my aid, by sending across the river, half a hundred good men, and within the week I shall have Senorita Rivera again my prisoner, and then I will sell her to you, if you pay my price, senor Texan."

"It is for her father I act, chief."

"It makes no difference, so that I get the gold, and that I must have. In the mean time you are to be my prisoner, and, Lone Star, I leave this man to your keeping; so take him to the Jug."

"He will be there when you want him, senor chief, I promise you," replied Lone Star, as he led Texas Jack away to the lock-up known as "the Jug."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SENTINEL'S FATE.

RED SNAKE was a man of superior qualifications, although he had a red skin, and had been reared in savagery.

He was one of those Indians who was now and then far above his fellows, and had a heart in spite of his thirst for the lives of his foes.

His own tribe had suffered terribly from both Comanches and Apaches, as well as from certain whites, and the remnant had retreated to a place of safety upon a reservation where they could live at least in peace.

But Red Snake would not leave his old haunts—would not go far from the graves of his fathers, and lingered behind with a few trusty warriors.

One by one these had been picked off, until at last Red Snake and four of his braves were hemmed in by a band of Man Tigers, and their end would have been sure and speedy, had not Texas Jack, guiding a squadron of cavalry from the fort, led them to the rescue of the gallant braves.

This service Red Snake did not forget, and when, some months after, he and his warriors were surrounded by a band of Comanches, and

had given up all hope, Texas Jack alone dashed in and with his terrible repeating rifle, put their foes to flight, it welded another link in the chain of friendship between the Tonkaway and the prairieman.

Months passed by, and one by one the Tonkaways were killed, until, sick, wounded and alone, Red Snake tottered up to the ranch of Texas Jack.

The ranchero was away, but Ebony, his man-of-all-work, had a big heart, and knowing that his master was friendly to the Tonkaway, he took him in and cared for him most kindly.

Returning, Texas Jack had warmly welcomed Red Snake, and through the long weeks of illness and suffering that followed he had nursed him as tenderly as he would a brother.

It was no wonder then that the ranchero and the Tonkaway became friends, and from their first trail together, Texas Jack found in Red Snake a comrade and friend upon whom he knew he could rely to the bitter end.

It was therefore with a feeling of hope that Red Snake was at work that he went into his dismal hole in the rocks called the Jug, and before the stout door of which Lone Star lay down to rest, so that all chance of the prisoner's escape was cut off.

"The Tonkaway still lives," muttered Jack, as he threw himself down upon a couch of tiger-skins that was to serve as his bed.

Nor was he mistaken, for Red Snake not only still lived, but was then entering upon a plot for the release of his pale-face pard.

His quick eye had detected, as he advanced with his prisoner, the form of the chief on horseback, and halting, he turned to the Mexican, and springing upon the horse by his side, he gagged him with a quickness and ease that was astonishing.

Then he led the prisoner's horse and his own back into the shadow of the chaparral, and making them fast, glided on after Texas Jack.

To his chagrin, he saw that the Texan had been most cleverly captured, and he was half-tempted to send an arrow into the heart of the Tiger King.

But he did not know how many he had to deal with, and so refrained, while he saw Jack led away into the thorny passageway by his captors.

Confident that they were taking him to their lair, the Tonkaway crept nearer to the entrance to the chaparral, and beheld the horse of the guard there.

This told him that the rider must soon return, and he determined to get his prisoner and horses to a place of safety as soon as possible.

Returning to the spot where he had left them, he led the animals hastily along the edge of the chaparral, past the horse of the guard, and on until he gained a secure retreat.

Then he tied the horses and muffled their noses so as to prevent their neighing, and, leaving the Mexican, Paulo, still bound in his saddle, he glided back to the path leading into the chaparral.

The sentinel's horse still stood where he had left him, and a glance was sufficient to show him that the guard had not returned.

He had not long to wait, however, before the sentinel appeared and lazily took up a stand within a few feet of the crouching Indian.

Another moment and Red Snake would have sprung upon him like a chaparral tiger; but just then, his keen sense of hearing detected the sound of human voices.

They came from the direction where the unfortunate Luis had fallen a victim to the ferocious wild beast.

The Indian saw that the Mexican did not hear the voices yet, and waited.

Soon the sentinel started, threw his gun across his arm, and stood on the alert. He, too, now heard the voices.

"It is the relief guard, he muttered.

Then two horsemen rode forward, and one called out in Spanish:

"Ho, Manuel."

"St, senors, I am here."

"It is more than we can say for poor Luis, for he lies yonder, torn to pieces by the tigers, Carajo! but they are wild to-night," answered one of the men as they came up.

"I feared poor Luis had gotten into trouble, but I did not know whether it was with the tigers or the Prairie Rattler, whom the chief and myself captured here a while since."

"No, you do not mean you have got Texas Jack?" cried one of the men, in glad surprise, while the other said:

"Caramba! but this is good news."

"Yes, we have got him; but you say the tigers have eaten Luis?"

"Picked his bones pretty well, comrade. He had a game to play with Tono to-night, and when I started to relieve the north posts I asked Paulo to go and take Luis's place until I got round."

"But I found no Paulo there, and Luis was terribly torn. You must have had tiger company too, Manuel?"

"Yes, but I do not fear them, or give them a chance to attack me; but, Pareja, as you take my place, you had better keep on the watch, for

they scream to-night through the chaparral as though they meant mischief," and Manuel turned to the man who was to relieve him, and who said sullenly:

"Curs' the brutes, I do not like them, and I fear I will some night meet poor Luis's fate."

"You must take the chances, Pareja, for the four paths into the lair must be guarded."

"Come, Manuel, and let us go, for I have a desire to see this famous man they call the Prairie Rattler," and the two men rode into the path leading through the chaparral, and leaving Pareja on guard, while Manuel little dreamed how near he had been to death.

Pareja did not at first seem inclined to dismount, and sat upon his horse, some twenty paces from the edge of the chaparral, as though to be out of reach of a spring from a tiger.

But as the screams of the wild beast gradually died away, he grew bolder, and dismounting, hitched his horse, while he began to pace to and fro before the entrance to the path.

As he did so, he sung in a low and not unmusical voice a Mexican love song, unconscious of the crouching form creeping nearer and nearer to him.

Suddenly the dark object bounded into the air, and fell upon the Mexican, from whose terrified lips broke the cry:

"El tigre!"

But no; it was no wild beast that had sprung upon him, but a human being, and one as merciless as the tiger that the Mexican believed at first had attacked him.

There was a short, silent struggle, an arm descending several times rapidly, the hand grasping a knife, and then the Mexican sunk dead at the feet of the Tonkaway.

Bending over his victim, Red Snake very coolly took his scalp, and then, unbitching his horse, mounted him and rode into the path with the quiet remark,

"Pony take me all right, where want to go."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TONKAWAY AT WORK.

"Ho, Lone Star, are you there?"

"I am here, you bet," was the answer of the guard over the Jug, as he raised himself to a sitting posture upon the approach of two of his comrades.

They were Manuel and the man who had relieved him from duty at the entrance path to the chaparral.

The moon, though on the wane, shone brightly upon the scene, revealing a pile of rocks, towering to the height of sixty feet, and occupying the span of an acre.

Around them, an impenetrable wall, excepting where the paths had been cut through, was the chaparral, dark, dismal and forbidding, but a safe barrier for the outlaws.

Within the rocks was the lair of the outlaws, and here they hid away, secure from all pursuit.

The Jug was in the very center of the pile of rocks, and was a small cave, the entrance closed by a stout door of logs.

The ascent to the Jug was by a ravine-like path, and this was guarded by Lone Star.

"Well, Lone Star, Alberto has just come from relieving guard, and when I told him we had the Prairie Rattler, he said he could not sleep until he had seen him."

"He is in there, and I am in no mood to let you see him, pards; but if you'll stand guard for me, Alberto, until I go and play a few games in the hall, I'll let you see him, for when I came here with the accursed prisoner, I was winning heavily."

"I'll do it, Star, if you don't keep me here all night."

"No, I'll be back in an hour or so," and Lone Star threw open the door, and continued:

"Come, Texas Jack, here are some gentlemen to see you."

The moon shone directly into the little den, and Jack was desecrated seated upon the tiger-skins, while he said, with a sneer:

"Gentlemen! God help the name when such as you wear it."

"Come, no back-talk, or you'll be lifted to the limb of a tree, Texas Jack."

"I do not fear it, Dick Turpin; but clear out and let me sleep."

The three Tigers laughed lightly, as they gazed upon their plucky prisoner, and finding that he would not talk to them they turned away, and the door was closed and barred as before.

"Lie down upon my *serape*, Alberto, close against the door, so if you drop asleep it will be all right," said Lone Star, whom Texas Jack had known under the name, most suggestive of his mode of life, of Dick Turpin.

"Never fear, Star, he'll not get away, sly as he is and brave," was the confident reply of the man Alberto, as the two others left the spot.

Seated upon the *serape*, with his back against the door, and his eyes gazing up at the moon, the Mexican soon became lost in deep thought.

Perhaps he was reviewing his past life, and remembering how some one act of evil had led him to a career of crime, where otherwise he might have been a man honored and respected.

It might be that he thought of those who had loved him in the long ago, for a tear shone like a diamond in his eye, and then rolled across his cheek.

Lost in reverie, he did not see a dark object appear above a rock near by.

Had he seen it, he would have observed that it was an Indian's head-dress.

Watching it, he would have seen a dark, stern face beneath it, the eyes bent upon him with a baleful glare.

But the Mexican was too deeply lost in thought to see or hear.

In fact, he did not dream of danger there, and thus went on with his reverie.

Then above the rock arose half the form of the Tonkaway, one hand grasping a bow, the other an arrow. Texas Jack's red pard had indeed come to his rescue.

The arrow was fitted, the string was drawn back, the heart of the Mexican was the target.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ESCAPE.

LITTLE dreaming of danger to himself, there in the very midst of the Tiger retreat, Alberto the Mexican sat gazing up at the moon, his back against the strong door of the outlaws' jail.

Within, waiting and hoping that the Tonkaway would come, and that no harm had befallen him, Texas Jack half-reclined upon his bed of tiger-skins, in total darkness, and securely bound.

Over the jagged edge of a rock, not ten steps away, was the Tonkaway, to one side of the guard, and with his arrow aimed at the heart of the sentinel on duty.

An instant only the thrilling tableau lasted, and then the deft fingers let go the arrow-head, and with a dull thud the sharp head buried itself in the human target.

The Mexican half-sprung to his feet, but sunk back as a groan broke from his lips, and his head fell forward on the rocks, just as the Indian glided up to his side and secured his bloody trophy.

Then unbarring the door hastily he allowed the moonlight to stream within the dark retreat, while he said, in a low tone:

"Red Snake come for his white brother."

"Pards for life are we, Tonk, God bless you!" warmly cried Texas Jack, and then he continued:

"Slash off these thongs, my Snake of Snakes, that I may grasp your honest hand."

"Red Snake glad," returned the Indian as he hastily freed the Prairie Rattler of his bonds, and the Tonkaway was certainly delighted at the success thus far of his daring venture.

"Free again, but weaponless," said Jack, deprecatingly, as he glanced at his empty belt, for he had been disarmed of his rifle, revolvers and knife when he reached the lair.

"Red Snake have all," was the low reply, as the Tonkaway led the way from the prison pen.

"What! you have my arms?" cried Jack, in surprise.

"Yes, have all."

"But where did you get them, Tonk?"

"Me ride Tiger's pony—he bring me to corral—heap saddles, heap bridles, much ponies there—belt of arms hang on saddle—Red Snake's white brother's weapons there too."

The Tonkaway spoke in disjointed sentences, but Jack understood him perfectly.

He also remembered that when he dismounted the guard Manuel had disarmed him and led his horse away, and from what the Indian said, the Tigers doubtless kept their weapons, saddles and bridles near the corral where were their horses, and the Mexican guard had evidently put his there too.

"You have been scouting around pretty lively, Tonk, to find out what you have to-night; but now which way, for I came in blindfolded, and know no more where I am than a Man Tiger does of honesty?"

"Come," said the Tonkaway, and he led the way away from the rocks toward the dark chaparral, which seemed as impenetrable as a wall.

But the Tonkaway had reconnoitered well, and entered the chaparral at one of the narrow passages cut through it.

Behind them came the voices of the Tigers in the Hall, as the assembly cavern was called, and the pile of rocks looked like some old ruined castle in the moonlight, as Jack turned to look behind him.

Entering the path all was darkness; but the Tonkaway said quietly:

"Here white brother's weapons, saddle and bridle; horse further."

"Good! my noble Tonk," and the Texan grasped his weapons as though they had been his dearly-loved kindred.

A few paces brought them to the horse of the guard, which the Tonkaway had ridden to the retreat, and then leading back had hitched there.

"Him good horse; go much fast, stay long time," said Red Snake, who had discovered the good points of the animal in spite of the darkness.

Texas Jack quickly threw off the saddle and bridle upon the animal, and replaced them with his own, and then said:

"Now, Tonk, we must be off."

"Yes."

"But where is our prisoner?"

"Him wait all right."

"Ah! did you kill him?"

"No, not yet."

"And your horse?"

"Him there too."

"Good! now we will have to dust pretty lively, for it is not very long before day, and the Tigers will be hot upon our trail."

"They come slow."

"I don't know about that, for they are hard riders and good trailers, and will be most anxious to capture you, for you have killed one of their best men."

"Red Snake have two scalps," was the cool reply.

"Aha! you have been busy, I see, and we will have to make horseflesh suffer."

"Tiger no come."

"What do you mean?"

"Tiger don't love walk."

"No, but they will ride."

"Have no pony."

"There you are a little off, my red-skin pard; for, excepting the Wild Riders, they have the best horses in Texas."

"Dead horse don't go."

"No, but live ones do."

"No live pony; all dead?"

"Ha! you mean that you have killed their horses?" cried Jack, halting in the dark passageway as he was leading his horse and walking by the side of the Indian.

"Red Snake love pony, but love Red Snake and white brother more, so kill ponies of Man Tigers."

"By the Star of Texas, Tonkaway, but you have done red work this night! How many horses were there in the corral?" and Jack again halted, as they reached the edge of the chaparral and came out upon the prairie in the moonlight.

"Pale-face call him thirty," was the calm response.

"Well, I cannot blame you, Tonk, for it prevents our being pursued; but it is a terrible sacrifice of horseflesh."

"Ah! here is your prisoner."

"Good-evening, senor," and Jack spoke to Paulo, the Mexican, who still sat bound and gagged upon his horse.

"Too much talk man—Red Snake shut mouth up," explained the Tonkaway.

"Ah! I see you have gagged the senor. Well, we will let him remain so until we get some distance from here. Now, Tonk, mount, and let us be off."

"Go hacienda?"

"Oh! no, Tonk; our course lays toward the Staked Plain and the retreat of the Wild Riders," said Texas Jack; and with the prisoner between them, they urged their horses into a rapid gallop, skirting along the edge of the chaparral.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PRISONER GUIDE.

PAULO, the Mexican, who was the prisoner of Texas Jack, certainly felt most uncomfortable at the position he now found himself in.

He had seen the capture of the Texan, and the rising moon had given him an opportunity of recognizing his chief, the King of the Tigers, and yet the Rattler appeared a few hours after safe and ready for the trail, having escaped from the stronghold of the band with apparent ease.

What it all meant he could only conjecture, and why the chief had not at once put the Texan to death, as was his wont with his foes, he could not understand.

He at first believed that Texas Jack intended to kill him; but as he rode along by the side of his captor, and gazed into his open, honest face, he saw there no inhuman cruelty, and felt that he at least would not take his life without the best reasons for so doing.

Of the Indian he thought different, for he feared the Tonkaway greatly.

After a rapid ride of a mile or so, realizing the uncomfortable position of his prisoner, Jack said:

"Now, my man, I will take that gag out of your mouth and loosen your bonds a little, so that you will feel better."

"Thank you, senor, a thousand thanks, for that red-skin gagged and bound me with no light hand," said the Mexican, as soon as he was free from the gag, and had the cutting thongs loosened upon his wrists and ankles.

"Yes, Tonk ties for keeps," said Jack, as they rode on once more, and then he asked after a while:

"I believe you Tigers of the Chaparral know about where are the haunts of the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain?"

"The king has had scouts upon their movements, senor."

"With what result?"

"Very little, senor."

"I wish to know that little."

"Well, senor, the Wild Riders certainly live in the Staked Plain."

"Is not that impossible?"

"It has been so believed, senor; but it is true."

"Your scouts discovered this much?"

"Yes, senor."

"How?"

"They trailed the Wild Riders right into the Plain as far as they dared go themselves."

"Might the Wild Riders not have made a circuit through the Plain and come out at an other point where they had their retreat, yet thus give the idea that they lived on the desert?"

"I think not, senor."

"Your chief could trust his scouts?"

"Yes, senor."

"Well, I have never looked into the mystery of the Wild Riders dwelling upon the Staked Plain, as I have had plenty else to do; but I can hardly believe that they do live there, though many scouts, hunters and soldiers say so."

"They live on the Plain, senor, for I was one of the scouts that spent weeks in dogging their steps."

"Ah! I am glad to know this, for you can guide me to the point where they enter the Plain."

"Yes, senor, but I ask my life in return."

"You shall have it spared upon conditions."

"Yes, Senor Texas Jack."

"That you do not tell your chief where I have gone, when you return."

"I will not do so, senor."

"Remember, you have only your word to bind you, but I shall expect you to keep it."

"I will, senor."

"When you guide us to the trail of the Wild Riders, going into the Staked Plain, I will set you free and you can return to your life of outlawry, for I have no time to bother with you as a prisoner."

"Thank you, senor."

"You can tell your chief that you escaped from us."

"Yes, senor."

"And if he comes on up this way, when he is able to mount his men, I will know that you have told him whither I go, and I will set the Tonkaway here upon the track of killing you, and he will find you, hide where you may."

"I believe it, senor," said the Mexican, with a shudder.

Then he said:

"But, senor, the chief will doubtless push right on at daylight in chase of you."

"Oh, no; he will not, unless he comes on foot," said Jack, with a smile, while the Tonkaway gave his usual grunt of:

"Ugh!"

"I do not understand, senor."

"He has no horses to come with."

"He has some thirty in the corral."

"He'll never ride one of those animals again; Mister Tiger, for they have gone to the happy grazing-grounds of all good horses."

"Caramba! they are dead?" demanded the terrified Paulo. "You killed them?"

"The brute must suffer for the human, Senor Mexican, you know, and the Tonkaway did his work well."

"Caramba! but I am glad I am not in the lair, when the chief finds it out."

"You think he will be a little displeased?" innocently asked Jack.

"He'll be worse than the most savage tiger in the chaparral, and somebody's head will fall, while he'll never forget you, senor, to your dying day."

"The remembrance shall be mutual, I assure you; but has the band other horses?"

"Yes, senor; many scores of them; but they are a long way off from the lair."

"How far off?"

"Seven leagues away in the chaparral."

"Well, as those who go for them will have to hoof it, and then return, the Tigers will hardly start on our trail until it is a day and night cold."

"They will not be on it before, senor, and knowing you as they do, they will consider it useless then, and wait for another time to settle the account with you."

"I am ready to pay any debt I owe them on demand; but here we are at the old ford, so which way to strike the trail of the Wild Riders?"

"This way, senor," and the Mexican turned to the northward, and being released by Jack from his bonds, from that moment acted as guide, for though the Texan and Indian knew the trail to the Staked Plain well, they did not know at which point it was, where, when pursued, or upon their swift gallops through the country, the Wild Riders disappeared in the lifeless desert where men dared not venture and hope to live.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNKNOWN WOMAN.

WHEN the dawn was near at hand a motte loomed up ahead on the prairie, and Texas Jack, finding there good water and grass, de-

terminated to halt a few hours for rest for both man and beast:

The animals were staked out, the *serapes* spread, and then Jack said:

"Now I will have to make sure of you, *senor*," and with this he securely bound the Mexican.

"You fear I might strike while you are asleep, *senor*?" said the Mexican.

"I fear nothing, only I guard against accidents, for you could not move without arousing both the Tonkaway and myself, tired as we are."

"But we do not wish to be disturbed, and as there is no one in sight for miles upon the prairie, we will get a good rest."

The Mexican was bound, and then placed between Jack and the Tonkaway, when all about immediately sunk to sleep, leaving the horses cropping the grass near by.

"*Senor*, I hear the sound of hoof-falls upon the prairie."

It was the Mexican who spoke. He had awakened soon after dropping to sleep, and for awhile lay quiet, unable to close his eyes again in slumber.

He knew that he had no chance to escape, and why should he attempt it when Texas Jack had promised him his freedom?

Still he would test the assertion of the Texan that a movement would awaken both him and the Tonkaway.

Instantly he turned over upon his back, and turning his head to one side, saw the eyes of Texas Jack wide open at once and fixed upon him.

He turned his head the other way and met the glittering orbs of the Tonkaway.

"It was no boast," he said to himself, as he closed his eyes, and the two captors did likewise.

For some moments he lay quiet, and then, accustomed to expect danger in every sound, and trained to watchfulness, asleep or awake, his ears detected a dull thud far away upon the prairie.

Lying as still as death he listened, and then he was aware that the sound grew louder, and was made by the hoofs of horses.

Then he spoke as he did in warning to Texas Jack.

"The sound just aroused me, thank you, *senor*. Do you hear it, Tonk?"

No answer came from the Tonkaway, and both the Texan and Mexican glancing in that direction found his place vacant.

He had evidently detected the sound before the Mexican, and had so quietly slipped away as not to disturb his companions, although they were within two feet of him.

"The Tonkaway is well named when he is called Snake, *senor*, for he certainly is as noiseless in his movements."

"Yes, Red Snake is a wonderful man— Ah! here he is," and the Tonkaway approached.

"Well, Tonk?"

"Much pale-face coming."

"Who are they, Tonk?"

"Maybe soldier, maybe Wild Rider."

"Ah! and they come from which direction?" The Tonkaway pointed toward the north.

"We will have a look at them," said Texas Jack, rising and approaching the edge of the *motte*.

He saw afar off upon the prairie, coming from the northward, and in a course that would take them by the timber half a mile or more distant, a party of some twenty horsemen.

They were riding at a gallop, and excepting the fall of their horses' hoofs rode in apparent silence.

"They are not soldiers, Tonk."

"How white brother know?"

"If they were soldiers we would hear the clanking of their sabers."

"White brother speaks straight all time; guess Wild Riders."

"Yes, Tonk, I reckon they are Wild Riders, and though we are looking for them, we do not wish to bite off more than we can chew, so we will be ready to light out should they turn toward the timber."

The horses were at once saddled, and the three men stood ready to mount, while they watched the horsemen as they dashed along over the prairie, Texas Jack looking at them through a small glass he always carried with him.

"Yes, they are Wild Riders, as I can plainly see now, and if I mistake not there is a woman riding alongside of the one in the lead."

"There is a woman in the band, *senor*," said the Mexican.

"So I have heard, though I have never seen her in the glimpses I have had of the Riders; but see! they are not coming toward the timber."

The Wild Riders were now abreast of the timber, and held on their course by it, so that the trio who had so closely watched them could return to their rest.

But who was the woman, was the question that greatly puzzled Texas Jack.

Rena Rivera had certainly been taken from the Tigers of the Chaparral by the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain, and could it be she, that they were taking back to her home?

It might be, and it might not, and the Texan was in a quandary what to do.

The Wild Riders were dashing along at the fast pace which had gained for them their name, and it would be impossible to head them off, and, by letting them pass, thus get a nearer look at the woman in their midst.

Were he mounted on his own horse, Yellow Chief, and the Tonkaway upon his fleet animal, such a course might be possible; but, as it was, it was not to be considered.

To follow in their trail and get up within sight of their first night camp, might be to discover that the woman was not the *Senorita Rivera*, and thus precious time would be lost.

Where the Wild Riders were going, of course Texas Jack could not know, and hence he determined to continue on his way as before, and endeavor to discover their retreat.

The absence of so many of their number would be to his advantage, and if he did not find Donna Rena there, then he would be convinced that the lady with the horseman was none other than that fair maiden, and that the Wild Rider Chief was taking her to her father to restore her for a fitting ransom.

Returning to their camp, when the Texan decided what it was best for him to do, they again sought rest, and slept until long after dawn, awaking greatly refreshed.

A fire was soon kindled and a good breakfast was prepared, for the Tonkaway was an excellent commissary, and always went well prepared, as he knew that it pleased Texas Jack, not to speak of himself.

Mounting their horses, they rode out of the timber directly for the trail left by the Wild Riders.

"*Senor*, as we have such a broad trail before us now, I will not need your services as guide, for I am convinced that the Wild Riders left this one, and I shall follow it to the starting-point."

"And, *senor*, do you mean that I am to leave you?"

"Yes, you are free to return to your life of outlawry, and remember your promise not to tell your chief whither I have gone."

"I shall remember it, *senor*."

"And take my advice, pard, and take to some other calling than throat-cutting and thieving for a living, as you will end your days with a rope around your neck, if you do not."

"Thank you, *senor*, for your advice, and believe me, I no longer look upon Texas Jack as a foe, and if luck goes hard with you, and the Tigers again get their claws upon you, you will find me your friend; yes, and the friend of the Tonkaway, too."

"I believe you, pard; now good-by!"

The Mexican politely raised his sombrero and rode away alone, while Texas Jack and the Tonkaway pressed rapidly on in the trail of the Wild Riders, the Texan remarking:

"Tonkaway, I would give much to know what that feminine was with the Wild Riders."

"Find him out soon," was the response.

"Yes, but if we knew now it might save us a long trip in search of these Wild Riders."

"Want know where Riders have camp, anyhow?"

"You are right, Tonk, and this trail will doubtless lead us directly to it, so we will press on while it is fresh," and their horses were urged into a swift pace, while the Mexican rode slowly away across the prairies to the westward.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS FLIGHT.

In his anxiety to press on the trail left by the Wild Riders, that he might not find it obliterated when he reached the Staked Plain, Texas Jack determined not to spare horseflesh, and he and the Tonkaway kept their animals hard at it until noon.

Then a halt was made of little more than an hour, and once more the horses were urged on.

Toward evening the face of the country began to change somewhat, for clumps of timber (or *mottes*, as they are there called) became less frequent, and the rich grass of the prairie gave place to a more sterile growth as the two horsemen drew nearer the barren desert known as the Staked Plain, which had caused the death of so many hundreds of men and beasts that had dared to invade its forbidden wastes.

"We will have to camp in yonder timber, Tonk, for there is about the last water and grass we will find," said Texas Jack, pointing to a growth of trees, in which he knew was a spring.

The Tonkaway signified assent, and the two tired horses were soon staked out to feed upon the grass near the spring.

Then the Tonkaway set to work to cut with his knife a large quantity of grass and bundle it up, while Texas Jack drew forth a needle and thread and commenced to make his india-rubber blanket into a bag to hold a few gallons of water.

"Oh, we intend to invade the desert in style, Tonk," he said, as he looked upon his work when completed, and then gazed at the four little

bales of grass which the Indian had tied up for the horses.

"Yes; have not bad time; get back before die," said the Tonkaway.

"Yes; we must never say die on this trip, Tonk. Now let us give the horses a good rubbing down, to limber them up, and then eat our supper and hunt our blankets."

These several duties did not take long, and provisions were cooked to last several days on the desert, after which they retired to rest.

But before the glimmer of dawn they were awake, the india-rubber bag was filled with fresh, cool water and made fast to the saddle on Jack's horse, the bales of grass were thrown across the back of the animal ridden by the Tonkaway, and with their canteens filled and their provisions in a haversack, they mounted and started upon the trail the moment it was light enough for them to see the tracks in the ground, so rapidly becoming more and more sterile.

Until the sun soared above the prairie horizon the traveling was not bad; but by the time that the heat of the orb of day made itself felt, the Texan and the Tonkaway were toiling over the sands of the Staked Plain, which threw back an intense heat that was almost blinding to their eyes.

But the horses were urged on, and no high wind having swept the Plain, the trail was yet plainly visible.

"It comes out of the desert, Tonk and must have an end," said Jack pointing to the trail.

"Must have heap water a' end."

"To support life of man and beast there must be water, grass and food, Tonk; but who would look for any of the three articles in the Staked Plain?"

"Heap plenty, here, reckon, or pony and Wild Rider die."

"You are right, Tonk; and if we don't find the heap plenty, we will die; but we are in for it now, and must press on, though how those Wild Riders live in the Staked Plain is more than I can fathom, for they are not Arabs, and do not ride camels, and even if they were they would have to have food and water."

"I tell you, Tonk, I think they penetrate the desert to throw off pursuit, and come out at another point where they have a camp with plenty to eat and drink about them."

"Maybe so," answered the Tonkaway, not understanding how it was the Wild Riders managed to live in the Staked Plain, and willing to accept any explanation possible.

Continuing on their way for hours, both horses and riders began to feel the effects of the burning heat and thirst, and seeking a hollow in the sand they halted for a short rest.

Some long poles which the Texan had told the Tonkaway to cut were then stuck up in the sand, and the *serapes* stretched upon them, affording a shelter most acceptable for the horses and their riders from the intense rays of the sun.

Then the india-rubber bags were opened and a quart of water given to each horse, with a few mouthfuls of grass from one of the little bales, after which Jack and Red Snake ate a light lunch and took a pull at their canteens.

The water was by no means cool, but it refreshed them, and after half an hour's rest they resaddled their horses and pushed on.

As they rode over the top of the sand-hill, behind which they had camped, they both drew rein suddenly, for their eyes fell upon a sight that seemed fairly to startle them.

They did not draw their weapons, as though afraid, but gazed ahead of them and then at each other.

A couple of hundred yards from them was a horse and rider.

They were at a stand-still, and their gaze was upon the invaders of the desert.

The horse was snow-white, and the rider was a woman!

"The Donna Rivera, by the Star of Texas!" cried Jack, in utter amazement at beholding the maiden there and alone.

"Ugh! white squaw heap brave!" ejaculated the Tonkaway.

"Thank God we have found her, and she has doubtless escaped, Tonk, and is trying to find her way home. Come, we must get her out of this heat as soon as possible," and they urged their horses forward in a gallop.

But instantly the maiden wheeled her horse as though to fly.

Seeing the act, Jack called out:

"Hold, *senorita*! We are friends!"

But away darted the white horse.

"Come, Tonk, we must overtake her!" cried Jack, and as he pressed on in hot pursuit, the Tonkaway by his side, he shouted:

"Hold, *senorita*! do not fly from your friends. I am Jack Omohundro, sent by your father to bring you home."

But on fled the white horse, though the maiden glanced steadily back over her shoulder and evidently heard the words of the Texan.

"Great God! she is mad, I verily believe, for the heat of the Staked Plain has crazed her."

"But mad or sane, Tonkaway, we must catch her!" cried Texas Jack, as he drove the spurs into the flanks of his fairly flying horse.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LOST ON THE STAKED PLAIN.

WITH no doubt in his mind as to the identity of the horsewoman to whom he gave chase, Texas Jack was most anxious to overtake her, for he could not feel that her flying from him was from fear, or a mind crazed temporarily by the heat of the Staked Plain.

He had made a mistake as regarded the one he had taken for the Senorita Rena Rivera before, but certainly he could not be mistaken in this case.

She had ridden away from home on a snow-white horse, it had been said, and the one he now pursued was mounted upon an animal of that description; but then Jack remembered that the steed which Rena Rivera had left the hacienda upon, had been taken by the Tigers of the Chaparral, and this somewhat puzzled him.

But the maiden, who was the very counterpart of the Donna Rivera, he had left at Don Castro's hacienda several days before, and certainly she could not be that one.

No, it could be none other than the Senorita Rena, for she was the image of her, and it certainly looked, finding her there alone upon the Staked Plain, and remembering that she had been taken from the Tigers by the Wild Riders, as if she had in some way managed to escape, and by some strange accident, had gained possession of a white horse.

How long she had wandered alone upon the Plain he could not tell; but her horse did not seem to be fagged out, and yet to see her flying from him, gave him cause to fear that her mind was unsettled.

He knew that she must recognize him, or at least know that he was a Texan, in spite of his Indian comrade, and pressing on at his utmost speed, he shouted to her just who he was, and that he had been sent by her father to rescue her.

But his words made no impression upon the girl who sped on in silence, now and then turning her gaze behind her upon her pursuers who came along side by side.

"White squaw leave trail," suddenly said the Tonkaway.

"You are right, Tonk, she is leaving the trail we were following, and which she was evidently taking when we saw her."

"We must catch her, Tonk."

"Horse run much fast."

"He does indeed, and we do not gain an inch on him; but we must run her down."

"Don't like white squaw to leave trail."

"True, it is bad, for we will have only our own trail to follow back, and if a wind comes up, that goes quickly; but we cannot leave the girl now, Tonk."

"No leave white squaw now, she die—we die too," was the calm response.

"While the lamp of life holds out to burn, Tonk, the vilest sinner may return out of this, so there's hope for us; but the girl is dropping us, as I live."

"Ugh! horse much heap fast."

To the surprise of both the Texan and the Tonkaway, the maiden suddenly began to go rapidly away from them, the white horse having evidently not been at his speed before.

Again Jack called loudly to her, but without even causing her to turn her head toward them, as before.

Faster and faster the white horse now ran, seemingly with apparent ease, and it was not long before both Texas Jack and Red Snake realized that the chase was fruitless.

Like huge ocean waves the sand of the plain rose here and there in their path, and in a little while the maiden was just disappearing from sight.

But she checked her horse suddenly, waved her hand several times as though in farewell, and then disappeared from their view.

"Well, this is remarkable," said Texas Jack, reining in his panting horse.

"Much heap funny," responded the Tonkaway.

"I don't see the funny part, Tonk; but look there, some poor fellows have laid down here to die."

As he spoke he pointed to the dead forms of a horse and his rider, which even the wolves had left untouched, not daring to invade the desert in search of food.

"Him heap dead."

"I should remark that he was, Tonk, and I would bury the poor fellow did I not know that the sands would soon do that much for him."

"He is a Mexican, Tonk."

"Yes; him from over the river."

"And has now gone beyond the Great River which can never be recrossed."

"But come, we must not tarry here, but press on in the trail of the girl, who certainly has gone mad, and I fear will yet come to grief."

"It would be a fearful story to take back to her father, that his beautiful daughter had gone mad, fled from help, and died a fearful death upon the Staked Plain."

"Much bad story; but horse hang head," and the Tonkaway motioned to their horses, who seemed greatly fagged.

"Yes; they are getting greatly fagged, though the senorita's horse ran away from us

as though he was a thoroughbred just led out of the stable."

Bathing the nostrils of their horses with a little water, taking their saddles off for a few moments to cool their backs, and giving them a quart each of the warm, but precious liquid, the Texan and the Tonkaway again pressed on after the maiden, following her trail, which led further into the desert waste.

"I don't like that," said Texas Jack, after a few miles had been passed over, and the Tonkaway knew that he alluded to the wind that was rising, and which would soon obliterate the trail left by the white horse.

But on they pressed, until at last they came to a halt, for the trail was no longer visible, the wind having erased the tracks left in the light earth of the desert.

"Well, Tonk, we have lost the trail, and ourselves too," said Jack, quietly.

"Much heap bad," was the calm response of the Indian, who seemed not in the least moved by the danger in which they found themselves.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GUIDE'S WARNING.

IT was certainly with no enviable feelings that Texas Jack realized the situation in which himself and the Tonkaway found themselves.

Yet, in all of his trouble, he could not but think of Rena Rivera, and pity her for the fate she must meet alone upon the Staked Plain.

Taking their bearings from the sun, the two unfortunates sought to find their way out of the desert as best they could; but the wandering trail led them by the flying maiden had confused them considerably, and they knew not what distance they had come.

Then too their horses seemed fagged out, and the warm water in the india-rubber bag refreshed them but little.

Another thing, Texas Jack did not wish to leave the desert, even if he found it in his power to do so, without making another effort to find the maiden, so he said:

"Come, Tonk, we must try and find the girl and either help her out of the scrape as best we can, or go under with her."

"Red Snake do what white brother tell," was the answer.

Then the two made a circuit, the one to the right, the other to the left, and not losing sight of each other, met at a given point; but neither had seen any trace of the maiden whatever.

This they tried again and again, and with the same result.

Then they were forced to come to a halt and stake out their *serapes* for a shelter, as their horses were about used up.

The sand filled their eyes and nostrils, and their throats were parched in spite of their frequent pulls upon the water in their canteens, which had become really tepid.

The heat was intense, and though nearing the horizon, the sun beat upon them with pitiless fury, while the warmth from the hot earth was sickening.

At last the tired horses could go no further, and they halted for the night.

But such a night of suffering neither the white man or the red-skin had ever known, for the ground fairly baked them as they lay upon it, and their brains became dizzy with heat.

In vain they tried to eat, for their parched throats would not permit of their swallowing a morsel, and they envied the horses chewing almost savagely at the bundles of grass they had brought.

At last the dawn broke, and the last drop of water in the bag was given to the animals, and little remained in their canteens for themselves.

Perhaps it was the heat that bewildered them, but they became confused as to which way led the quickest to the edge of the desert, where they could get succor, and for awhile they roamed listlessly about.

"I fear we are done for, Tonk," articulating his words with difficulty.

"Much heap bad; but still live," answered the Tonkaway, using one of the ranchero's favorite expressions of hopefulness.

"True for you; Red Snake, the Tonkaway, still lives, and so does Texas Jack, and they are not the ones to say die yet," returned the Texan, cheerily.

And on they wandered, until to go further seemed the greatest effort.

Then, when their brains were on fire, they were startled by the fall of hoofs.

Quickly they glanced at each other and instinctively got their weapons ready.

Who could it be?

Whoever it was, was coming at a pace that did not show a fatigued horse.

The next instant a hoarse cry broke from the lips of the Texan and the Tonkaway, as over a sand-ridge dashed a horse and rider.

"The Donna Rivera!" said Texas Jack.

"White squaw sure," rejoined the Indian.

She halted upon seeing them, and they saw that she did not look fagged out as they did, while her white horse arched his neck as though he cared not for the heat of the plain.

Instantly, they started toward her, urging their utterly worn-out horses into a slow trot.

At once she turned, and beckoned to them,

and then disappeared from sight over the sand-ridge.

Fearful of losing her again, they spurred on, while Texas Jack said through his shut teeth:

"Tonkaway, was that the Donna Rena, or an apparition of my heated brain?"

"Red Snake see white squaw too."

"Then it was no apparition— Ah! there she is, and apparently waiting for us."

"On, you lazy brutes, on!"

They beheld her a few hundred paces ahead of them, and followed after.

She threw a glance over her shoulder now and then, and kept on at a pace that held them at the same distance.

Eagerly striving to come up with her, they almost forgot their sufferings and the fearful heat, and soon they saw that the desert began to wear a less barren look.

Here was a tree, and there another, and ere long they came to a pool of water.

The maiden beckoned to them as they approached it, as though to prevent their stopping, but it was more than they could do then to control their thirst-maddened horses, who plunged their mouths deep into the by no means good water.

Unable to resist themselves, they sprang from their saddles, and bathed their faces and took a few swallows of what to them was a god-send.

The maiden did not halt when they did, and seeing this, and fearful of again losing her, they spurred their horses forward once more, and after a few more miles of travel they saw that they were leaving the desert and coming upon a land that was fertile.

Before them was a large clump of timber, and the leaves of the trees did not wear the parched look that all other foliage they had lately seen did.

Straight into the timber rode the maiden, and then she disappeared from sight.

A few moments after, Texas Jack and the Tonkaway rode into the delicious shelter of the trees, their horses hardly able to stand, and they threw themselves from their saddles and bent over a cool crystal spring that bubbled up at their feet.

When at last they had slaked their thirst they turned to search for the maiden, who certainly had acted as their guide out of the plain.

Nowhere was she visible, but further on the keen eyes of the ranchero and Indian detected horses staked out.

What could it mean? Was there a camp of Wild Riders in the timber?

If so, they had certainly come into a trap, for their horses could go no further.

But, seeing no human forms, and only two horses, they cautiously approached them.

They were fine animals, they noticed, and looked up at their approach.

They were staked out with long lariats, and near the stakes lay saddles and bridles.

Approaching them Texas Jack saw pinned to the horn of one a slip of paper.

To his surprise it was a note, and was addressed:

"To SENOR OMOHUNDRO,

"Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler."

Opening it quickly, he read as follows:

"SENOR:—I have guided you from the plain where you would have met your death, and I leave you here two horses that will carry you back to your ranch, and I beg of you to depart at once, for dangers your little dream of await you here."

"What I now do for you, I beg you to keep secret."

The writing was in a strangely beautiful feminine hand, and there was no signature.

"What can it mean, Tonk?" said Jack, as he told the Indian the contents of the note.

"Red Snake off trail," was the frank admission of the Indian, and then he suddenly pointed out upon the desert.

There, some distance off, and riding directly into the desert waste, was visible the maiden who had so strangely guided them to safety and silently warned them of dangers they must fly from.

CHAPTER XXX.

TRACKING THE KIDNAPPERS.

"TONK, I am thrown off my balance," said Texas Jack, as he saw the maiden riding away, and glanced at the paper he held in his hand.

The Tonkaway did not understand what being thrown off one's balance meant, so simply said in reply:

"Ugh!"

"She certainly guided us out of the Plain, and now goes as coolly back to the desert as though she had no fear of its terrors, and really loved its burning sands."

"White squaw not fool."

"You are right, Tonk; but how in the name of the cowboys, did she ever learn so much of the Staked Plain? for she certainly is none other than Rena Rivera, for we left her counterpart at the Don's hacienda, and there certainly cannot be three of a kind."

"Ha! Tonkaway, see there!"

As Texas Jack spoke he suddenly saw the maiden rein her white horse to a halt, and there,

right over the top of a sand-hill a lasso came whirling toward her.

She had ridden into an ambush, the lariat was skillfully and successfully thrown, the white horse was caught in the coil, and four horsemen rode over the sand-hill toward her.

Though taken wholly by surprise, the maiden did not lose her presence of mind, and hastily drawing a pistol she fired, and with deadly aim, for one of her foes dropped dead from his horse.

But before she could fire a second shot she was seized, disarmed and bound.

"Come, Tonk, to the rescue of yonder brave girl!" cried Texas Jack, springing toward one of the horses left for them by the maiden.

But the Tonkaway grasped his arm and said, quickly:

"There 'nother pale-face; they Tigers—don't go, for kill my white brother, or Red Snake."

"Follow trail."

"You are right, Tonk, as you always are, for we are hardly in a condition to fight two to one, and as they do not know that we are here, we can follow their trail; but do you think they are Tigers?"

"See chief!" and the Tonkaway pointed to the man who had thrown the lariat.

"You are right, that is the Tiger King, and in some way they have gotten horses and come upon our trail."

"You don't see our Mexican among them, do you, for I am half blind?"

"No, be not there; but white squaw heap brave, kill one Tiger."

"She did, indeed, and his comrades are leaving him for coyote-picking, for they are anxious to get away."

"See! they are riding off at a quick pace for their lair."

"We follow heap soon," was Red Snake's laconic response.

"We will, indeed, and I tell you, Tonk, we must get that girl out of the clutches of those Man Tigers."

"White brother speak straight."

"Well, let us prepare to follow them, as soon as they are out of sight; but in the mean time I think that about a gallon of that cool water taken internally, and the application of a barrelful externally, will make us feel like different men."

"Drink heap, wash little," answered the Tonkaway, who had the hatred of his race for cleanliness.

As soon as the Tigers were out of sight, Texas Jack and Red Snake, greatly refreshed by their rest, and food, for they found a haversack of provisions by one of the saddles, mounted the horses left by the maiden, and leaving their own tired beasts to wander where they willed, left the timber, following upon the trail of the Tiger kidnappers.

They had not ridden very far before Texas Jack said:

"Tonk, these are splendid animals."

"Heap good pony."

"They are fresh, too."

"Yes, want to go much fast."

"The Tigers' horses are not fresh."

"No, come heap long way; look tired."

"The Tigers are making for the chaparral."

"Ugh!"

"They will enter it by the nearest passage on the north side, that will lead them to their lair."

"White brother talk right."

"We can make a circuit out on the prairie, as soon as it is dark, get there first and ambush them."

The Tonkaway's eyes glittered with delight.

"We can kill two at first fire, I can lariat the king, and then you can shoot the fourth, and the senorita is ours."

"Talk much sense."

"I think it is a better plan than to let the Tigers get the maiden into their lair."

"Heap good; white brother got big head, much sense," said the Indian, charmed with the plan.

"It will be a big thing for us if we can take the Don's daughter back to him, and with her the King of the Chaparral Tigers."

"Much funny."

"Yes, for us, but not for the Tiger King."

"Hang him, Red Snake get scalp."

And so it was arranged, and the two trailers pressed more rapidly on until they came in sight of the Tigers.

Keeping them just in view until dark, they then pulled out to one side, and urged their horses forward at a swift pace to head off the outlaws at the chaparral.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DOUBLE AMBUSH.

KNOWING the country as they did, and that those they tracked were Tigers of the Chaparral, Texas Jack and the Tonkaway headed their horses for the path to the lair, which they felt assured the outlaws were making for.

As the latter pressed on hard, only the tired condition of their horses, and the fact that the animals ridden by the Texan and the Indian being fresh, enabled them to accomplish the work they set out to do.

But they kept up a sweeping gallop, and to-

ward midnight knew that they had passed the outlaws and had thus far been successful in their plan.

But they dared not go at a slower pace, as they knew they had to find a secure place for their horses, gain the entrance to the chaparral, and have, perhaps, a Mexican sentinel to master should one be on duty there.

"Kill him heap little time," was the Tonkaway's comment upon this point, and had a sentinel been there, there is little doubt but that he would have been as good as his word.

But the post was deserted, they found, and biding their horses near by they gained a secure retreat for their ambush.

They then found that they had little time, for out upon the prairie was heard the fall of hoofs approaching, and soon after in the darkness the Tigers and their captive came in sight.

Notwithstanding their attention was riveted upon the coming outlaws, both Texas Jack and Red Snake detected a sound that told them some one else was approaching the spot, and along the edge of the chaparral.

But they were not to be cheated out of their prize at such a moment, even if it was a reinforcement of Tigers, and they got their revolvers ready for desperate work, for the Tonkaway had become an adept in the use of pistols, though he preferred his bow and arrow to a rifle.

"There are only three or four of them, Tonk, from the sound, and we'll give them a surprise, too," said Jack.

"Him stop, now," remarked Red Snake a moment after, as the party coming along the edge of the chaparral was no longer heard.

"All right, we will devote our attention to those in our front."

"Heap good."

"Remember aim at your man on the left, and I'll take the one on the right, but do not hit the chief, or hurt the girl."

"Me shoot straight."

"I know that, but we must have no mistake, Tonk."

"As soon as we have fired, I'll catch the chief with my lariat, and you drop the fourth man with a shot, and then I'll call to Donna Rena who we are, and we'll turn to meet that other party, whoever they may be."

"Heap good; white brother great chief."

"Now be ready, for here they come."

At a slow pace, now that they felt secure from pursuit, the four Tigers and their captive came along directly for the point where they little dreamed of ambush.

In the front rode the Tiger King, and by his side, bound to her saddle, was the maiden, her white horse alone of the animals showing no distress at their rapid pace.

Behind them rode the three outlaws, and, seeing this, Jack whispered:

"I must lariat the chief first, and you drop the Tiger on the left with an arrow."

"Then spring upon the other two and let them have arrows, also, while I secure the chief, and we may be able to bag the four without firing a shot."

"Then turn to see who it is that is lurking in the edge of the chaparral yonder, but do not fire till we know that they are not friends."

"Tonkaway hear all; white brother talk heap sense."

"Now, Tonk, here goes."

With this the lariat left the hand of Texas Jack, just as the arrow sped from the Tonkaway's bow.

Out from the dense darkness of the chaparral's shadow went the coil and the arrow, both to do their work well, for an outlaw dropped dead from his horse, the dart in his throat, and the Tiger King was dragged from his saddle heavily to the ground.

Then, ere the two remaining Tigers could understand what had happened, Texas Jack bounded toward the fallen chief to secure him, while the Tonkaway sent another arrow searching for human life.

But one, the white horse ridden by the maiden, suddenly darted forward, and striking Texas Jack fairly in front, knocked him down, almost dashing the breath from him.

That incident turned in the favor of the Tiger King, who managed to throw from about him the lasso's coil, and bound into the shadow of the chaparral, just as a second one of his men fell dead, and the third turned in flight, an arrow quivering in his shoulder.

Rising to his feet as quickly as he could, Texas Jack saw that the Tiger King had escaped, one of his men was just disappearing on horseback in the shadow of the chaparral, and two others lay dead upon the ground, while, dashing away over the prairie, was the white horse, his fair rider bound to her saddle.

"Quick, Tonk, get our horses!" he cried.

But the Tonkaway had already anticipated this order, and led them from the shadow of the chaparral, just as a party of half a dozen horsemen were seen to spring out upon the prairie and go in chase of the white steed.

Throwing themselves into their saddles the Texan and his red pard spurred away in pursuit, just as flash after flash illumined the dark edge of the chaparral, and the Tiger King, find-

ing his foes far fewer than he had supposed, opened with his revolver.

In spite of his desire to keep his mouth shut, the Tonkaway could not refrain from a ringing war-cry of defiance as the bullets sped harmlessly by, and instantly came an answer from the half-dozen horsemen pursuing the maiden.

That cry was sufficient to betray who they were, for Texas Jack cried in a hoarse voice:

"Comanches! by the Texas Star!"

"Yes, Comanche braves; Red Snake get heap scalp," was the reply of the Tonkaway, as he rode along at full speed by the side of the Texan, in full chase of the Comanches, who in turn were chasing the white horse who bore so fair a rider.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DOUBLE CHASE.

THINKING the affair over, as he sped along in chase of the Comanches, who were in hot pursuit of the white horse, with the maiden bound to his back, Texas Jack came to the conclusion that the Indians were a scouting party who had been skirting the chaparral, when they saw the Tiger King and those with him coming across the prairie.

Knowing their proximity to the lair of the Man Tigers, the Indians had halted to avoid being seen, little dreaming that Texas Jack and the Tonkaway were lying in ambush for the coming party.

The scene that had followed had evidently been a surprise to the Comanches, who had wished to escape from danger themselves, and at the same time endeavor to capture the bone of contention, for their good eyesight showed them that the one mounted upon the white horse was a woman.

Leaving the Tigers, and those who ambushed them, to fight upon the principle of the famous Kilkenny cats, if so they wished, the wily chief of the Comanches had started in chase of the white horse.

In fact, that chief was none other than Iron Arm, the renegade chief, and, armed with a good field-glass, he had first detected that the animal carried a female.

As they sped along, their ponies comparatively fresh, they saw that the white horse kept his own in front with apparent ease.

Then they heard the war-cry of the Tonkaway, and recognized it as from one who was of a tribe that had ever been their bitter foes.

Instinctively they had answered it, and thus they betrayed who they were, for in the darkness and flurry of the moment Texas Jack had not been able to find out whether they were Indians, soldiers, Tigers, or cowboys.

To the amazement of Iron Arm and his braves, they beheld but two men dash on in pursuit of them, and the Tonkaway's cry had led them to believe that they were both warriors of that tribe.

But ere they had gone half a mile they saw one of the horsemen suddenly come to a halt, and next came a flash and ringing report, which was instantly followed by the death-cry of a Comanche as he fell headlong from his saddle.

And that flash had revealed who it was that came in chase, for from the lips of Iron Arm broke the name:

"Texas Jack!"

On dashed the Comanches, leaving their dead companion's scalp as a prize for the Tonkaway, for when they would have halted to carry the body with them, their white chief sternly ordered them on, and the riderless horse of the slain warrior dashed along in their midst.

"Yes, that is Texas Jack, and the other is his Tonkaway pard, and no two men in Texas are to be more dreaded."

"Ay, and as Texas Jack robbed me of Rena Rivera, my prize, and he just ambushed that band of Tigers, yonder girl is none other than the Don's fair daughter, who in some way has fallen into the hands of the Chaparral King."

"But we are five and they are two, and, by Heaven, Rena Rivera shall again be in my power!"

"Come, braves, you must catch yonder white horse, and then we will take the scalps of the Prairie Rattler and the Red Snake, your foes!" cried Iron Arm, and at his words his five warriors gave a ringing war-whoop, just as the Tonkaway drew rein at the side of the dead Comanche and tore from his head the scalp he so much prized.

The deadly shot of Texas Jack certainly taught Iron Arm a lesson, which he at once determined to profit by as much as lay in his power.

This was to put as great space between himself and the Texan as was possible, and endeavor to capture the maiden as soon as lay in his power.

To this end he urged his horse on, and his warriors strove hard to keep pace with him; but Iron Arm had a faculty of being always well mounted, and his horse drew ahead of those ridden by his braves, and began to gain slightly upon the white.

Seeing this, Jack drove his rowels deep, and found that both his and the Tonkaway's horse had a speed equal, if not superior, to the animals ridden by the Comanches.

"We must overtake them, Tonk, and thin out their numbers, too," he said, as he brought his matchless repeating-rifle around for work again.

Reining in his horse to a sudden halt, the weapon again flashed, and this time a pony went down.

His rider was hurled far over his head, and a yell of rage broke from his fellow-braves as he lay an instant as though killed.

But he seemed but momentarily stunned, and staggered to his feet just as the Texan and the Tonkaway were upon him.

With a piercing war-cry Red Snake threw himself upon the half-dazed Comanche, and the struggle was brief but deadly; for when the Tonkaway again sprung into his saddle, another scalp hung at his belt.

It was evident to Iron Arm, who was some distance ahead of his braves, that they did not like this one-sided fighting, for their arrows were of no use upon their pursuers, while the long-range repeating-rifle of the Texan picked them off at will.

Loudly they called to their chief to halt and fight the Texan and the Tonkaway, believing that they certainly must easily triumph over the two.

But Iron Arm was gaining upon the white horse, and he cared not to lose his present advantage.

Once he could reach the side of the maiden, and he was willing to turn at bay and fight to the bitter end.

But when another shot from the Texan wounded a warrior slightly, their demands for him to halt and face their foes were too imperative for him not to heed, and he instantly rode back toward them, cursing them for cowards, while he muttered:

"If they would only stand and fight the Texan and his red pard, and let me capture the girl, I would not care if the last one of them was killed."

"Chief come back—going to fight," said Red Snake, observing the movement of the renegade.

"All right; we will have to face the music, Tonk—Ah! they have halted, so we must go slow," answered Texas Jack, as he brought his horse to a stand-still, the Tonkaway doing likewise.

Returning to his warriors, Iron Arm at once prepared to give his pursuers battle, and to do this he knew that he must charge down upon them as rapidly as they could, sending a shower of arrows as they did so, and also firing from the rifle which he carried at his saddle-born.

Realizing what their plan was, Texas Jack and the Tonkaway sprung from their saddles, and making a shield of their horses, began firing when the Comanches started, the former with his rifle, the latter with his bow and arrow.

With deafening yells the Comanches charged, firing as they came, while their chief fired his rifle, also a repeater, and it seemed as though in their headlong flight they must sweep over the two men who stood at bay.

But Texas Jack was as cool as an icicle, and aimed with deadly effect, dropping two ponies and a warrior dead, and wounding another, while the Tonkaway also brought down a horse.

Seeing that they were being worsted, the chief at once determined to save himself, and, wheeling to the rightabout, sped away like the wind, while a warrior attempting to follow him had his horse brought down by an arrow, and before he could rise the Tonkaway was upon him.

"Tonk, we have done well, yet yonder man is none other than Iron Arm."

"I recognize him by the flashes of his rifle."

"Him go after white squaw."

"Yes; and we are on foot, for your horse is dead, and mine too badly wounded to be of use, I fear," and Texas Jack turned to the animal who had shielded him so well with his own body, and drew an arrow from his neck and shoulder.

In the mean time the Tonkaway went upon a scalp-gathering tour, unmindful of an arrow sticking in his shoulder, and that another had gashed his forehead.

While Jack was seeing if he could doctor up his wounded horse, the Tonkaway returned with his gory trophies, and leading two ponies which he had caught, and were not wounded.

"Bravo, Tonk, they are worth a fortune just now, for my horse here is too hard bit to go, and I shall kill the poor fellow to put him out of his misery."

With this Texas Jack sent a bullet from his revolver through the brain of the faithful animal, and then their saddles were quickly transferred to the backs of the Indian ponies, and away they started in chase of Iron Arm, whom they knew to be in pursuit of the maiden, though neither one was now visible upon the prairies far and wide.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RUN DOWN.

HARDLY had the Texan and his red-skinned comrade ridden a quarter of a mile in pursuit of the renegade chief, before the Rattler suddenly drew rein.

"Ugh!" said the Tonkaway, not understanding the reason of the halt.

"Do you hear the hoof-strokes, Tonk?"

The Indian listened attentively for an instant and then, throwing himself flat upon his face upon the prairie, lay with his ear to the ground.

"No hear him," he said.

"Then, Tonk, we can do but one thing, and that is to go back to the scene of the fight, and camp there until morning."

"White brother know right."

"If we go on, we are on a fool's errand, for we can neither hear nor see the white horse or Iron Arm."

"Yes."

"Then we will camp until dawn and then take their trail."

"Heap good."

"Our horses will be rested, and I am sure the white horse will go all night before he is caught, if he is then, and then both animals will be run down, so that we can readily keep a steady pace and overtake them."

"White brother talk heap sense."

"Tongue like medicine-man," said the admiring Tonkaway, who was really worn out himself and did not object to a little rest.

"Come, we will go back and make a dry camp on the prairie," and Texas Jack led the way.

The ponies were unsaddled and staked out, the serapes were spread, and almost instantly the Texan and the Indian were in a sound slumber, for even their powerful frames felt the terrible strain upon them of the past few days.

It was not yet dawn when Texas Jack awoke.

He had had five hours' sleep, and was greatly refreshed, though he was still a little stiff.

"Come, Tonk, we must be trail-hunting."

In an instant Red Snake was upon his feet, and the ponies, wholly rested, were at once saddled and mounted.

Stark and stiff the dead Indians and ponies lay about them, but neither the Texan or Indian took more than a passing glance at them, so accustomed had their lives become to such scenes.

With the first glimmer of day they struck the trail left by Iron Arm's horse, and soon saw that it led into that made by the white steed.

At a gallop they pressed on, and when the sun arose they were miles on their way.

A clump of timber ahead offered them a resting-place for breakfast, and a spring of icy water was most refreshing to both man and beast.

A venison steak, broiled on the coals, a tin cup of coffee and some crackers formed their breakfast, and a good one it was for two hungry men.

Refreshed by their rest, the cool water, and an hour's pull at the juicy grass in the timber, the tough Indian ponies started out apparently perfectly fresh, and their riders held them at a steady canter for hours, readily following the double trail left by the white horse and the animal that Iron Arm bestrode.

"That white is a goer and a stayer too, Tonk," said Jack.

"Much good pony."

"He has kept the renegade behind him all night; but how must the poor girl have suffered, bound as she is in her saddle!"

"Hurt her heap; see, white pony stop often and look back," said Red Snake, pointing to the tracks.

"Yes, he evidently has outwinded the horse of Iron Arm, and just trotted ahead out of reach; but the renegade has held on well."

"Yes, him heap bad man."

"There is one good thing, Tonk."

"Ugh?"

"The white horse is going right toward home all the time, and if he held out would reach the Don's hacienda this afternoon, so if Iron Arm did not catch up with him, we may hope to find the senorita at home."

"Maybe good, maybe bad," was the unpromising reply of the Indian.

Understanding pretty well what their horses could stand, the Texan and Tonkaway kept them at a steady and swift gait until noon, when they suddenly saw a trail crossing the one they were following.

"It is made by the white horse and the renegade's animal," said Jack.

"It last trail," rejoined Red Snake.

"You are right, Tonk, this trail was made after the one we are following, and the white horse was doubtless turned from his direct course from some reason and doubled on his own tracks, the renegade following him."

"Yes," answered Red Snake, who was closely regarding the trails.

"Well, we will make considerable by taking the freshest trail, for we will avoid the circle they made, so here goes, Tonk."

"Yes," answered the Indian, following his

white companion, and they pressed on once more until they came to a small stream.

Here both of the horses they were pursuing had stopped for water, and the tracks showed that Iron Arm had dismounted to slake his thirst.

A short halt for rest, food and water, and they pressed more rapidly on.

After a ride of several hours they came to the banks of a small stream, fringed with trees, and crossing it, as the trail did, suddenly saw the white horse ahead of them, and far out upon the prairie.

His fair rider was upon his back, but her body was bent forward, until her head seemed to rest upon his neck, and her long hair, shaken loose from its coil, fell in waves upon the broad breast and shoulders of the horse.

"Great God! can she be dead?" cried Texas Jack, in alarm.

"But where is the renegade?" he asked, after an instant, as they spurred rapidly toward the horse.

"Pony there," said the Tonkaway, pointing ahead of them in the grass, where lay the dead body of the renegade's horse.

"Hal! he has ridden him to death."

"But where is Iron Arm?"

"He go heap quick," answered Red Snake, evidently of the opinion that the renegade chief had seen them coming and had gone on foot as lively as it was possible.

"We can find his trail, Tonk; but let him go until another time, for now yonder poor girl needs our care," and Texas Jack urged his pony forward into a rapid gallop, the Indian following close upon his heels.

The white horse was roaming listlessly about, his head far down, and with every indication that he had been pushed to his utmost.

Seeing the two horsemen coming toward him, he pricked up his ears and tried to gallop off; but the effort was not kept up but for a few yards, and then he dropped down to a slow trot, the best he could do.

Pushing on Texas Jack soon rode alongside of him and seized his rein, drawing to a halt.

The slender form of the maiden he saw was bound in the saddle with lariats, her hands were tied in front of her, and her body was bent forward until her head rested upon the neck of the animal that had borne her so well and so far.

One look into her face and Texas Jack saw that she had either swooned away, or was dead.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE VICTIM.

UPON reaching the side of the utterly worn out white horse Texas Jack threw himself from the saddle and quickly severed the bonds that held the maiden.

The slender wrists were swollen and inflamed, and the face was white as that of a corpse.

Laying his hand upon the pulse, when he had gently placed the form upon the soft prairie-grass, he found that life was not extinct.

"Thank God, she lives, Tonkaway; but she must have aid which we cannot give her, so I will mount and you hand her up to me."

"Heap good; hacienda not far," said Red Snake.

"No; her home is not half a dozen miles away, and I will ride on at the speed of my pony, if I kill him."

"Pony die, take my pony; go heap quick," remarked the Tonkaway, as he handed the slender form up to Jack, who placed the maiden before him and at once set off at a run, driving the rowels deep to urge the pony on.

The Tonkaway sprung into his saddle and followed, while the white horse, relieved of his load, came trotting on behind, seemingly not anxious to be left alone.

A few miles of the hot pace, and Jack's pony began to fail under his double load.

"Here, Tonk, give me your horse and you take mine," cried the Texan, and the transfer was quickly made.

Again Texas Jack spurred on, and the Indian's pony was forced far in the lead by the cruel spurs.

Then the hacienda of Don Rivera appeared in sight, and soon after into the walled inclosure dashed the Texan and his precious load.

"She yet lives, and care will bring her round all right, Don Rivera," called out Jack as the hacendero met him as he sprung to the ground, still clasping his precious burden in his arms.

"But who is she, Senor Texas Jack?" cried the Don, advancing quickly.

"Your daughter, sir: the Donna Rena—Great God! who is that?"

With this last exclamation Jack started back, the face of the unconscious girl still resting upon his shoulder, and his stout arms still clasping her slender, graceful form.

And no wonder was it that his eyes became riveted upon a being who had suddenly glided, rather than walked, to the side of the Don, for she was the living image of the maiden he held in his arms.

"Ah, Senor Omohundro, I am glad to meet you once more, for now I can thank you for my life, and the noble work you did to rescue

me from a cruel fate; but who is it that you bear in your arms?" and the maiden whom Jack still gazed upon in utter amazement advanced toward him.

"Are you the Senorita Rena Rivera?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I am, senor."

"Then in God's name who is this poor girl who is your very counterpart?" asked Jack.

"Ha! it is the same maiden whom you brought to me before, senor, and whom I believed to be my Rena."

"But she seems ill, and needs our care; quick, my child, call servants, and bear the poor girl to your room," said the Don.

The order was quickly obeyed, and when the strange girl, the very counterpart of the Donna Rivera, was left in the care of a competent nurse and the young mistress of the hacienda, the Don led the Texan to his own room and asked:

"Now, senor, tell me where you again found this strange girl?"

"First let me know, Don Rivera, when your daughter returned?"

"Two days ago."

"And from where?"

"Senor, the Donna Rena has a strange story to tell, for she was not captured by Indians, as I supposed, but by the Man Tigers of the Chaparral."

"Yes, Don Rivera, and perhaps I can tell you that they were taking her to their lair in the chaparral, to hold her for a large ransom from you, but were boldly attacked by several Wild Riders, who took her from them."

"This is true, senor; but how know you this?" asked the Don, in surprise.

"They, the Wild Riders, carried her to their haunt, in the Staked Plain, or wherever it may be," continued Jack, "and then brought her to you, demanding the ransom the Tigers would have asked?"

"You are mistaken there, senor, for the Wild Riders treated her with the utmost kindness, and brought her within sight of the hacienda, watching her until they saw her enter the walls, when they rode away."

"But they demanded no ransom, and restored her to me in safety."

"I am glad to hear this of them, and suppose that the Senorita Rena can tell us where the Wild Riders have their haunt, and clear up some of the mystery regarding them?"

"I do not doubt but that she could, if she would; but her lips are sealed as to who and what the Wild Riders are, and she will tell me nothing; but now tell me where you found that poor girl, who is so strangely like my own sweet Rena?"

Texas Jack then told the story of his strange and thrilling adventures, since his second departure in search of the Senorita Rena, and of the part which her counterpart, or double, had played through all.

"This is remarkable indeed; but where did you see her first, after leaving the chaparral, senor?"

Texas Jack remembered the request of the maiden, in her note, to keep secret what she had done, so he said, evasively:

"Oh! we saw her upon the border of the Staked Plain, when the Tigers lariat her horse, and at once started on their trail, for I had not the slightest doubt of her being other than your daughter, whom I knew the Wild Riders had taken from their foes of the chaparral."

"But, Don Rivera, explain to me, please, how it was we found her upon the Staked Plain, when she was your guest when I left, expecting to remain some time?"

"My dear senor, the very night following your departure she arose and disappeared most mysteriously, either going to the stables and saddling her own horse, the same animal you had captured from the Comanches, or bribing some of the peon slaves to do so for her."

"I was horrified the next morning when I learned of her departure, and sent a band of cowboys upon her trail, fearing the poor girl's mind was wandering."

"But she covered up her tracks so thoroughly as to throw them off the trail, and they returned with no tidings of her— Well, Rena?" and the Don turned to his daughter, who just then entered the room.

"The senorita has returned to consciousness, father, and appears only prostrated with fatigue, so that rest will make her herself again."

"The Virgin be praised for that, my child," ejaculated the Don, while Texas Jack mused, as he was taken to his room by a servant:

"The Donna Rena knows the secret of the Wild Riders, and will not betray them, and this strange girl, whom I have twice rescued, I believe is in some way connected with them."

"Well, I shall keep my eye upon her, and the next time she leaves this hacienda, be it by day or night, the Tonkaway and myself strike her trail and follow it to the end."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DOUBLES.

"WHERE am I?"

The question was asked by the strange coun-

terpart of the Senorita Rivera, as she lay upon her bed near the open window, gazing out upon the beautiful garden filled with flowers of all kinds, the perfume of which the balmy morning breeze wafted into the room.

A peon woman sat near her, a palmetto fan in her hand, and to her the question was addressed.

"The senorita is in the home of my master, Don Castro Rivera," was the answer.

"What! again in his hacienda?"

"How strange, and how weak and full of pain I am; it seems as though I had been sick for long weeks."

"Here is Senorita Rena, lady," said the woman, as the Donna Rena swept into the room, looking exquisitely beautiful in her morning-dress trimmed with lace.

"Ah! senorita, I am so glad to see you better this morning, for I feared you were going to have an attack of fever last night, after you recovered from the deep swoon in which you had been so long," and Rena Rivera took a seat by the maiden, at the same time gently clasping her hand.

The fair stranger uttered no word, but gazed upon her in apparent speechless admiration, until she had seemingly noted every feature of her face.

Then she said, softly:

"And you are the Senorita Rivera?"

"Yes, and your name I must ask in return?" was the soft reply, while she, too, gazed upon the stranger with deep interest.

"Call me simply Camila."

"Well, Senorita Camila, I am happy in finding you better, and that you will soon be yourself again."

"And I was mistaken for you?" said Camila, in a low tone.

"Yes, so it seems, and I was mistaken for you, senorita," answered Rena, with a smile.

"How strange, for you are very, very beautiful," was the innocent reply.

"And so you seem to me, though, with all frankness, I never looked upon myself as beautiful."

"Yet how came I here once more, for not a week ago I left this hacienda, not wishing to give your father pain by reminding him of you whom he had lost."

"I recall all that happened up to—up to—I do not know when, or how long ago, for ages seem to have gone by to me since then; but I remember I was captured by the Man Tigers, and two men, men to whom I owed my life on a former occasion, came to my rescue."

"I was bound to my horse, hands and feet, and he fled with me across the prairie."

"Then others pursued me, Comanches, headed by one whom I had every reason to dread, for it was Iron Arm, the renegade chief, a man, Senorita Rivera, who took me for you, called me by your name, and had sent his warriors to capture you, but they took me instead."

"Indeed! the man known as Iron Arm, the renegade, did this?" said Rena Rivera, in deep amazement.

"Yes, senorita, he said he had known you in the past, and made all manner of threats to force me to marry him, pledging reform and all else, if I would do so, all the time believing me to be yourself."

"This is remarkable."

"Believing him to be a madman, I fled from him, and your father has doubtless told you of my wondrous escape from death, through the courage of the man men call here the Prairie Rattler, and his red companion, a Tonkaway chief?"

"Yes, I have heard all, and how you were brought here, even my father believing you to be his daughter, and I pitied you deeply in your sufferings."

"Last night the Senor Omohundro—"

"Who, senorita?"

"The Senor Omohundro, or Texas Jack, as you know him, told us of your cruel flight before Iron Arm, the renegade, and how he found you at last unconscious, bent forward upon the neck of your horse, and utterly prostrated."

"Your noble horse saved you from the clutches of that wicked man, and I have had the splendid animal well cared for, and to-day he seems as good as ever, for I went out to the stables with my father and the Senor Omohundro to see him half an hour ago."

"I thank you, senorita, for your kindness to my noble horse, while far more than thanks, far more than gratitude, is due you for your care of me in my distress; but you said awhile since that you had been mistaken for me."

"Will you tell me when, and by whom?"

The face of Rena Rivera flushed crimson at the question, and she dropped her eyes, while she seemed as if at a loss for a reply.

Then she said quickly:

"Oh! that is a secret, Senorita Camila, that I cannot now tell you."

The fair stranger looked surprised at the response, but answered:

"As you please, senorita; but you can tell me of your sufferings while a captive, and your rescue, for you were captured by Indians, I believe?"

Again the face of the Don's daughter crim-

soned, and she hesitated for a reply; but soon she said:

"No, senorita, I was not captured by Indians, but by the band of outlaws known as the Man Tigers of the Chaparrals, and from them I was rescued by a gallant party and restored to my home."

Camila seemed to feel that the Senorita Rena had kept something from her, that she had not told all; but she said nothing more upon the subject, while Donna Rivera, wishing seemingly to drop herself as a subject of conversation said:

"And now, Senorita Camila, you are to be my guest as long as you please to remain, and if you would only make our hacienda your home, you would give joy both to my father and myself, who would then have twin daughters."

"I thank you from my heart, Senorita Rivera, for your kindness, and for awhile at least, must accept of your hospitality; but then I have a home to which I must return, and where there are those who long for my coming, and fear that harm has befallen me."

Rena Rivera hoped that she could induce her fair guest to join them all in the library, but Camila seemed to shrink from this, and begged to remain in the quietude of her room, and this report was taken to the Don and Texas Jack, who were both disappointed that they should not see and know more of the mysterious and beautiful stranger, who was certainly the Donna Rena's double.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MIDNIGHT DEPARTURES.

TEXAS JACK certainly enjoyed his evening in the Rivera household.

The night before he had gotten well-rested, and during the day that followed had taken a gallop over the prairies with the Don and his daughter, while in the afternoon, as was the custom in Mexico, he indulged in a siesta in a hammock in the gardens.

The Tonkaway had also been content, for he had been amply supplied with food, and had pleasant quarters, while the Don had presented him with a splendid horse, and a superb Mexican saddle and bridle studded with silver, along with numerous other presents, which had tickled his fancy immensely.

Then Rena Rivera had not forgotten him, but had given him a new head-dress of superb feathers, necklaces of rare beads, a rubber blanket, a gayly-colored serape, and innumerable little trinkets that greatly gladden the heart of an Indian.

The Don had tried to force upon Texas Jack a horse, and a purse in which there was a small fortune; but they were firmly but politely refused.

The second evening spent in the hacienda Jack had enjoyed immensely, for he had fully recovered from the hardships of his trip, and listened to the sweet voice of Rena Rivera in rapture, as she sung ballad after ballad for him, accompanying herself upon the Spanish guitar.

Delicious wines and sweetmeats were on a silver salver near, fragrant cigarritos were at hand, and the Don sat enveloped in a cloud of smoke, happy in the restoration of his daughter.

But all felt that it would have been pleasanter had the beautiful stranger, alone in her room, been willing to join them; for the Donna Rena had said that she seemed no longer an invalid.

At a late hour the three separated, and Texas Jack went to his room, and stood looking out over the court, while he became lost in deep thought.

How long he stood there he did not know; but after awhile his eyes fell upon two forms that glided out from the shadow of the wall of the hacienda, and walked briskly toward the stables.

In the darkness they disappeared and he saw them no more, and after awhile he began to undress and was soon in his comfortable bed.

Sleep was just closing his eyes when he heard his door softly opened.

"Who is there?" he asked, instinctively putting his hand upon his revolver, which long habit had caused him to have within reach, sleeping or waking.

"Red Snake," came the low response.

"Ah, Tonk; it is you, is it?"

"Yes."

"Come in and tell me why you are prowling about the Don's hacienda like a burglar."

The Indian softly closed the door behind him and answered:

"White squaw gone."

"Who has gone?"

"Sick young white squaw."

"What! the girl we brought here?"

"Yes."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Out on prairie."

"But how?"

"Ride white pony."

"But how did she get away?"

"Come out hacienda—go to stable—get pony and ride off."

"But, Tonk, how could she do this without waking up the stableman and the portero at the gate?"

"Pony man wake up and get white pony for squaw—old squaw come with young squaw to stable—guard at gate open for her."

"Then there are some of the Don's servants who are treacherous to him."

"White squaw have heap gold; heap gold buy white man, red-man, nigger man, and squaw, too."

"Your head is serenely level there, Tonk; but did she go alone?"

"Squaw and white pony."

"And where were you?"

"Me have plenty sleep, sit up and smoke at window—see all."

"Ah! Well, Tonk, we must take her trail at once, for I am determined to solve the mystery about this strange girl."

"Red Snake ready."

"Well, wait until I get dressed, and we will go together," and Texas Jack was soon ready for the prairie.

Lighting his lamp he wrote a line to the Don as follows:

"Will Don Rivera pardon the midnight departure of myself and the Tonkaway; but knowing that the fair stranger who was his guest had secretly departed, I take her trail, as much to protect her from other dangers upon her way, as to solve the mystery of who she is."

"If Don Rivera will kindly send a cowboy to my ranch, to tell my man Ebony that I still live, he will confer a great favor, as it may be some time yet before I return."

"With remembrances to the Senorita Rivera, I have the honor to be Don Castro's friend."

"OMOHUNDRO."

This note was addressed and taken with him to the stables, where Jack called up the man who slept there.

"I wish my horse, my man, and the Tonkaway's, too," he said.

"Will the senor have the pony he last rode here?" asked the Mexican.

"No, I wish my own horse, Yellow Chief, and the Tonkaway will ride the animal lately given him by Don Rivera."

"Yes, senor," and the horses were soon led out ready for their trip, Yellow Chief giving a neigh of delight at again seeing his master.

"Hand this letter to Don Rivera, as soon as he rises," and Jack gave the Mexican the note he had written.

"Has any one gone out upon the prairies to-night?" asked Jack, as he put his foot in the stirrup.

"No one, senor," was the ready lie.

"I know to the contrary, sir, and I advise you to be careful how you accept gold from strangers, for though in this case you may have done no harm, at another time you might by your act betray all in the hacienda to death," said Jack, sternly, turning and facing the Mexican, who was now thoroughly alarmed, and cried:

"Oh, senor! does Don Rivera know of my act?"

"No, but I shall keep my eye on you in future, and should you fail him he shall know; and more, I shall help him punish you."

"Now it was the strange lady who rode out to-night?"

"Yes, senor."

"And who aided her besides yourself?"

The man hesitated, but Jack said:

"Tell the truth, or I shall take means to find out."

"The peon nurse, senor, came to me with a purse of gold, and said that the senorita wished to depart, and that I was to go to the hacienda, and while away, she was to come here and get her horse, which I was to have ready for her."

"And who else?"

"The portero, senor, was paid to leave the gate upon some excuse, while the senorita rode out."

"Well, be careful how you do such a thing again, and tell the peon woman and the portero that I know of their acts, and shall watch them."

"Yes, senor."

"Now bid the portero open the gate."

The Mexican obeyed with alacrity, and mounting, Texas Jack and the Tonkaway rode out of the walls of the hacienda, and, learning of the course taken by the strange girl, at once started off in pursuit, the Texan remarking:

"Tonk, as she goes this way, there is but one place she can cross the river, and so we will make for the ford and pick up her trail there at daylight."

"Heap sense," said the Tonkaway as the two rode on together.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

DON RIVERA was considerably surprised at the reception of the rancho's note, and also pained that the stranger maiden had a second time left his home under cover of the night.

He called the peon nurse and questioned her, but she frankly lied about it, saying that she

had slept serenely through the night in the little room adjoining the patient's.

The stableman was asked how the senorita had got her horse, and he said that he had come to the house late for orders for the morrow, and that her horse must have been taken out then.

Next the portero was visited, and he said that he had gone to the kitchen at a late hour for his supper, and found the gate unlocked upon his return, and that the maiden must have slipped out then.

As she did not wish to disturb her, the Donna Rena had not gone to see her guest before retiring, so did not know at what hour she had departed.

How Texas Jack had made the discovery they could not tell, but certain it was that he had most promptly started upon her trail.

While at breakfast Rena's maid came in and handed her mistress a note, which she had found upon the toilet-stand in the guest's deserted room.

Hastily opening it, Rena read aloud, written in an exquisitely beautiful hand:

"MY DEAR SENORITA RIVERA:—

"Do not feel angry with me, I beg of you, for leaving your home like a thief in the dark, after all the kindness I have received at the hands of your father and yourself."

"But my duty to others compels me to go, and it is not in my power to tell you who I am or why I must remain a mystery to you."

"I leave you with only love in my heart for your sweet self, and the wish, could it be possible, that we might be friends through coming years, but my destiny—a cruel one, perhaps—makes my path in life diverge far from the one that you must lead, and deeply to my regret."

"To your good father give my warmest gratitude and thanks, and to the noble Texan, who so fearlessly risked his life to serve me, remember me in kindness, and tell them not to think harshly of me for flying from those who have so well befriended me."

"The Virgin bless and protect you and yours, Senorita Rena, is the prayer of

"Your unknown friend,

"CAMILA."

Twice over did Rena Rivera read this letter aloud, and then she said:

"Father, I wish that poor girl could be persuaded to make her home with us."

"Indeed do I, my child; but she is as mysterious in her movements as a Comanche; but that bold Texan will be able to give an account of her, I warrant, when he returns, for he has a way of sticking to a trail to the very end—Well, Sancho, what is it?" and Don Rivera turned to a servant who just then entered the breakfast-room.

"Senor, a stranger has come into the hacienda, and begs its hospitality."

"Bid him welcome; but is he a caballero, vaquero, or—"

"A gentleman, senor, who says he is your friend."

"Then ask him at once into this room, though who he can be I cannot tell," and Don Rivera arose, while across his face passed a troubled look.

"Father, was it wise to ask him here, for foes often come under the guise of friends, and though you dwell in Texas, you have yet cause to dread enemies," said Donna Rena, also rising from her yet untouched breakfast.

"If he is alone, Rena, we have nothing to fear, and if he is a foe, then he has come into the lion's den," and Don Castro turned toward the door, through which Sancho led the stranger.

He was a tall, gracefully-formed man, yet of powerful physique, and though evidently an American, was dressed in the full dress of a Mexican cavalier.

His face was beardless, and his features regular and handsome, while his hair was dark and hung in waving masses upon his shoulders.

At first, as he gazed upon him, Don Rivera did not seem to recall his face; but the stranger bent low before him and said with a smile:

"Am I forgotten, Don Castro?"

"Hail it is the Senor Melton!"

"Yes, Don Castro, I am your old friend, Mark Melton, and now that I have recalled myself to their memory, will not Don Castro and his beautiful daughter bid me welcome?"

The Don looked annoyed, while Rena Rivera turned slightly pale; but the former said:

"Senor Melton, I once bade you welcome at my house as my honored guest; but your own conduct forfeited the friendship I held for you, and though I offer you hospitality, it is not as a friend."

"Don Castro, you are severe, for you have, with many others, condemned me without a hearing."

"I admit that circumstances were against me in that affair in New Orleans, which has caused me so much of sorrow and of suffering; but, to save my life, I was forced to depart, and I could not clear my name then of the stains cast upon it; but I tell you that I was innocent of intentional wrong doing."

"I went to Mexico, and I have amassed considerable wealth, and knowing where you had found a home, I have sought you here to beg again the honor of the friendship of yourself and your daughter."

The man spoke with an earnestness that seemed most truthful, and in his tones was real pathos.

Upon Don Rivera he seemed to make an impression by his earnestness, and the apparent truth of his statements; but Donna Rena was calm and cold in her manner toward him.

"Senor Melton, I sincerely hope that what you have said is to be believed, for once I respected you as a friend, and, as a proof of it, gave you the claim you asked upon my daughter's hand."

"As we now meet in my home in a land where you are a stranger, I offer you my hospitality, though the past between us must never be recalled."

"Be seated, please, and have breakfast with us."

"Don Castro, I thank you; but I would be pleased if the Senorita Rena would give me welcome?" and the gentleman turned toward the maiden, who coldly answered:

"Such welcome as the Donna Rivera extends to any one who may happen to be a passing guest, she gives, Senor Melton, to you."

"Be seated and join us, for we have not yet breakfasted."

Mr. Melton smiled and obeyed, while he at once entered into conversation with Don Rivera upon the advisability of investing his money in a cattle ranch in Texas.

After the meal was over the visitor was escorted to the room that he was to make his own during his stay at the hacienda, and the Don returned to the library, where he found Rena pacing the floor with a troubled look upon her beautiful face.

"Well, Rena, what do you think of Senor Melton's turning up here so unexpectedly?" asked the Don, as he threw himself into an easy-chair.

"He has some sinister motive in it, sir."

"You do not believe his protestations of innocence?"

"I do not believe him, father, for I have had cause to know that he is false-hearted in all things."

"And yet you once loved him, my child?"

"No, no, father, do not say that, for it is not true."

"I never loved Senor Melton, but I once respected him as your friend."

"When I was a mere boarding-school girl in New Orleans, you brought him to see me, and afterward you told me that it was your desire that I should some day become his wife."

"I had never loved any one, father, and as Senor Melton was handsome, courtly, greatly admired, and most devoted to me, I came to regard him most kindly, and consented to the engagement between us."

"But I always felt there was something about him that I could not trust him fully, and now I know that he was a fortune-hunter, and at heart a villain."

"Why he has sought us out here in our happy home, three years after his flight from New Orleans, I cannot understand; but I dread evil, father."

"The Virgin grant not, my child, though I confess to having the same sinking at the heart, the same foreboding of trouble at sight of him, and, though forced to make him welcome, he is indeed a most unwelcome guest."

"He says that he has been in Mexico, father."

"Yet, that surprised me, and worried me; but he cannot know me other than as I here appear—Don Castro Rivera; but should he, Rena, I am in the power of a very bad man, I fear—Ah, Senor Melton! it is you, is it? Walk in!"

And Don Castro turned pale as he caught the eyes of his unwelcome guest fixed upon him, and feared that from where he stood, just outside the library door, he had heard all that had been said.

"Yes, Don Castro, I decided to look you up, and at once communicate to you a proposal I have to make—Stay, Senorita Rena, and do not leave the room, for what I have to say deeply concerns you, too," and the visitor quietly took an easy-chair, while Rena Rivera, with flashing eyes, returned to her seat and nerved herself for an ordeal which she felt was at hand and must be met fearlessly.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MARK MELTON.

"WELL, Senor Melton, you have something to say to me, and also desire my daughter to hear it, as you requested her to remain just now?" said Don Castro, growing nervous as the silence that had fallen upon the three became oppressive, and a silence which Mark Melton seemed in no hurry to break, evidently enjoying the uneasy feeling that he felt pervaded the hearts of the Don and the Donna Rena.

"Yes, Don Castro, I have something to say to you, and I also desire that the Senorita Rena shall listen to all that is said, for she is as deeply interested in what my words will be as are you, senor, or myself," and Mark Melton glanced from the face of the father to that of the daughter in a way that showed he felt that he was master of the situation.

"By at once making known your wishes, Senor Melton, you will confer a favor upon both my father and myself," said the senorita Rena coldly.

"Well, senorita, I may as well tell you at once that my love for you to-day, is even greater than it was three years ago, when you were my promised wife."

"That time is past, senor, and though pledged then to become your wife, your own act, and flight from New Orleans, broke the ties that bound us together, and we will not again refer to the matter," and Rena looked the visitor squarely in the face.

"Ah! is it, can it be true, that when years have but added to my love for you, Senorita Rena, you have allowed your heart to grow cold toward me?" and the man spoke with great earnestness, and with a pathos in his tone that it seemed hard to believe was not real.

"Yes, senor, my heart has grown cold toward you, and I wish you to at once understand it."

"To be frank with you, I never loved you."

"I was a child then, as it were, and knew nothing of love, and as the friend of my father and because he trusted you, I became engaged to you."

"Now I thank God that your own acts severed us, and I was not made to live a life of wretchedness, as would have been my lot had I been your wife."

"My child!" said the Don with mild reproof.

"Ah! senorita! do not so speak to me, for my whole life would have been devoted to your happiness."

"But you speak of the act that drove me from you."

"In the eyes of the world I am guilty, but my own conscience does not upbraid me, and—"

"Your conscience is doubtless an elastic one, capable of forgiving its possessor many things," interrupted Rena with a sneer.

"You are severe, senorita," and the man's face flushed with anger; but he continued:

"Had I remained in New Orleans, with public opinion against me, I would have been hanged like a dog."

"Feeling my own innocence I left, and I sought a home in Mexico, hoping to win wealth, and then return and clear my name of the stain upon it."

"Yes, and more, with that stain washed out by proof of my innocence, to seek your hand once more and make you my wife."

"And you came here first to seek me, even before you had sought to prove yourself guiltless?"

"I came first to you, senorita, to see if you had ceased to love me."

"You find that I never loved you, and that the engagement that existed between us is forever broken!"

"Ah! no! do not say that, fair Rena, for sad indeed would be my fate."

"I have wealth, in abundance, and with a smile from you, a promise that you would become my wife, I will at once depart for New Orleans, clear my life of the stigma of guilt upon it, and then return to claim my beautiful bride, and prove that I can drive sorrow from your life forever."

"Speak, senorita, and say that you do not turn from me, that I have a right to hope, and you will become my wife upon my return."

"No, Senor Melton, I will give you no hope, for on the contrary, I cannot love you, though I would be glad, if only for your own sake, to have you return to New Orleans and clear your character there before those who claim you to be guilty of more than one crime."

"And when I have thus cleared myself, say at least that I may return here?"

"I will be glad to see you, as a guest, as a friend of my father, at all times, senor," was the cold response.

"And not otherwise?"

"Not otherwise, senor."

"You are cruel, senorita."

"I am just, Senor Melton, to both you and myself; but pray excuse me now, as I have heard what you have to say," and Rena went out of the room with the air of a queen.

For a moment a painful silence followed her departure, and then Mark Melton said hoarsely:

"Don Castro, you must make your daughter marry me."

"Must, senor?" and the face of the Mexican flushed with anger.

"Yes, must, for she shall be my wife."

"The Senor Melton forgets himself; but I excuse him, as I believe that he has really loved the Senorita Rena, and it cuts him to the quick to give her up," and Don Castro spoke in a tone not unkindly.

"I will not give her up, Don, and you must urge her to become my wife," was the angry response.

"I will not urge my child against her will, senor."

"But I say yes, Don."

"And I say no, senor."

The American looked the Mexican squarely in the face, and saw that he had a determined man to deal with, and that he could not be driven, so he said, quietly:

"Don Castro, do not let us quarrel; but think how I love your daughter, and have all these years."

"It has been her image that has kept me a good man, and made me struggle hard for fortune, and fortune I have at last won."

"All of my riches I now come to lay at the feet of the Donna Rena, and though she refuses my love now, I feel that it is but a passing whim that will vanish in time, and I beg you to urge my suit."

"No, senor, I cannot, and I will not," was the firm response of the Don.

"Will not?"

"Yes, such were my words, for I shall not urge my child to take any step that will bring unhappiness upon her, and as she does not love you, to marry you would indeed make her wretched, hence I refuse to ask it."

"By Heaven! but you shall!" almost shrieked the American.

"Never! and, senor—"

"Oh, senor! the prairie is filled with Comanches!" cried a servant, dashing into the room, and putting an end to the conversation which was certainly taking a most dangerous course.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE RED DOG'S DEMAND.

At the alarming intelligence brought by the peon servant of the Don, the host and his visitor sprang to their feet, and moved rapidly toward the plaza.

"This is no time for ill-feeling between us, Senor Melton, so come with me," cried the Don, leading

the way as he spoke to a stairway leading to the flat roof of the hacienda.

Mark Melton followed him in silence, and upon reaching the roof, they found there the senorita.

"Oh, father! the prairie is covered with the savage creatures," cried the maiden, her face white with dread as she turned toward her father.

"Holy Virgin!" almost gasped the Don, as he beheld hundreds of mounted warriors moving in a circle upon the hacienda, and completely surrounding it.

They were yet distant a mile, but the coil of savage humanity was tightening rapidly around the abode, as they moved nearer and nearer.

"I saw them, father, as I ascended to the roof, and calling to a servant down in the plaza, sent him to tell you," said Donna Rena.

"And my men—my vaqueros—where are they?" said the Don, gazing around the prairies in a vain search for his cowboys.

"They have doubtless been surprised by the Indians and slain, or captured, and driven off before they could warn you of their approach," said Mark Melton.

"And we are left to the mercy of those red-skins!" groaned the Don.

"It is not so bad as that, senor, for surely you can defend the hacienda," remarked Mark Melton, with surprise.

"I have not twenty able-bodied men in the hacienda, though there are half a hundred brave fellows out upon the prairies; and if they were here, I would not fear yonder force; but they are perhaps dead, and God knows we are at the mercy of the red-skins!"

"Let us first see what they intend to do."

"See! they have halted their circular line, and one is advancing with a white flag," and as Mark Melton spoke a horseman rode toward the hacienda while the human coil came to a halt just out of rifle range.

The horseman was well mounted upon a snow-white animal, and his attire indicated him to be a great chief.

He was in all the grandeur of war-paint, stripped to the waist, and displaying a sinewy body, which was striped with red, blue, white and black.

He wore a coronet of feathers, and was certainly a most gorgeous-looking being.

In the mean time the small garrison of servants in the hacienda had gone to their posts of duty, having been well trained to face danger and needing no orders.

The Don's weapons were near at hand, and if it must come to a fight the dwellers in the hacienda would meet it as best they could, though those looking up to Don Castro to see what he would do, showed pale and anxious faces.

"That chief is Red Dog, one of the most cruel of the Comanche tribe," said Mark Melton quietly as the Indian came nearer.

"You know him then?" asked Rena quickly.

"Yes, senorita, I know him well," was the reply, and then he added:

"I am one of the few pale-faces that have made his intimate acquaintance and live to tell it."

"I have heard of his cruel deeds scores of times; but see, he comes boldly up within range."

"He knows well that the white man does not fire upon even an Indian, bearing that white emblem of peace," and he pointed as he spoke to the little flag carried by the chief, and which was nothing less than a white lace shawl which had once adorned the fair shoulders of some unfortunate Mexican woman.

The eyes of all in the hacienda were now fixed upon the Comanche chief, who rode fearlessly up to within a few paces of the wall surrounding the garden, and there came to a halt.

"What does my red brother want?" called out Don Castro in English.

The answer came in the deep tones of the Indian:

"Me Red Dog, great Comanche chief."

"I have heard of the Red Dog and know that he is a great chief."

"But why comes he to the homes of the pale-faces, when his people dwell far away from here?"

"The tepee of the Red Dog is empty, and he seeks the home of the pale-faces for a bride," was the cool response, and at his words the face of Rena Rivera became livid, while the Don muttered:

"Diablo! I have a notion to drop him dead with my rifle," and he half-stooped to raise the weapon, which lay at his feet with his belt of arms.

"Are you mad?"

"They would sweep down upon you like a whirlwind, did you kill their chief."

"Argue the matter with him, and buy him off," said Mark Melton quickly.

"You are right, senor; but his infamous words made me almost forget myself."

"Oh! that my cowboys were here, or even that noble fellow, Texas Jack and his red-skin comrade, for he is worth a score of men in a combat."

"I have heard of the man you refer to, senor; he is called, I believe, the Prairie Rattler!"

"Yes, Senor Melton."

"And the Mexicans fear him as they do Satan, while the Indians believe he is an evil spirit; but the Red Dog is speaking again."

"What does the pale-face speak?"

"Do his ears hear the words of the Red Dog?" asked the chief.

"Yes, and I would tell the chief to hunt among his own villages for a bride, for no pale-face maiden can love a chief whose hands are red with the blood of her people."

"The Red Dog is a great chief; and he will not take a maiden from his own village, but one who is pale-faced, and rich in ponies and cattle."

"Ponies and cattle the Red Dog can have; but no maiden to drag down to wretchedness."

"The Red Dog must have gold too."

"You can have gold too, and cattle and ponies."

"And pretty white squaw?" and the chief pointed to the Senorita Rena, who stood calm but deadly pale, drinking in every word that was said.

"Never!" shouted the Don, and he stooped quickly to pick up his rifle.

But Mark Melton hastily put his foot upon it, and said sternly:

"Don't be a madman, Don; but wait yet awhile."

The Don muttered some unintelligible words, and the chief called out:

"Red Dog must have horn cattle, ponies, gold, and squaw."

"If don't give them to him he take them and kill father of pretty squaw, for he has plenty braves, and they want scalps," and he pointed in a majestic way to his circle of warriors.

"My child, we can but die defending ourselves; and if you find that all is lost, and the red demons get into the hacienda, take your pistol and send a bullet into your heart!"

"I will, father, and the end will soon come, for we cannot resist those red fiends."

"If I felt that they would spare you and our people, I would go with him; but if I did so—if Red Dog had me in his power, you would then be slain, and your people too, while our home would be sacked."

"So let us face the worst at once, and I suppose you, Senor Melton, will aid in the defense as long as possible," and Senorita Rena spoke with a calmness that was wonderful under the circumstances.

Without replying to the question of Rena, Mark Melton turned to Don Castro and said:

"You feel that you cannot beat these red-skins off, senor?"

"Assuredly, senor."

"But will simply sell your lives as dearly as possible?"

"That is all that we can do, Senor Melton."

"Then permit me to save the Senorita Rena from a fate worse than death, and her father's life and riches."

The father and daughter gazed upon the American with amazement.

How could he save them, when their twenty or thirty peon servants could not beat off the foe from the strong walls of the hacienda, they wondered.

"In Heaven's name, Senor Melton, if you have it in your power to save my darling child, do so for the love of the Virgin, and I will bless you!" cried Don Castro.

"And I will pray for you, senor, as long as life lasts," fervently responded Rena.

"I will now see what power I hold over yonder red demons," answered Mark Melton, and he called out in the Comanche tongue to the Indian chief.

The Red Dog started visibly, rode nearer the wall and stood gazing up at the man who, had addressed him in his own tongue, and who springing upon the wall of the roof, stood in full view of the red-skins.

CHAPTER XL.

MARK MELTON'S POWER.

THE Indian chief Red Dog seemed to be greatly surprised, when addressed in his own tongue by one of the three persons he saw standing upon the roof of the hacienda.

Riding nearer he gazed fixedly into the face of Mark Melton, who gave him a better view by springing upon the wall.

"The pale-face speaks the talk of my people as the Red Dog himself can," said the Indian.

"Yes, chief, and I see that you do not know me, now that my beard is off! so I will tell you who I am."

"The Red Dog listens; his ears would hear who the pale-face is," was the calm reply.

"Why are the Red Dog and his warriors on the war-path?" asked Melton.

"The Comanches are the foes of the pale faces, and the Red Dog would make his braves rich by seeking that which belongs to their enemies."

"And the Red Dog, having once seen the beautiful Lily of the Prairie, would take her to his tepee as his squaw?"

"The white warrior speaks straight, for the Red Dog has come for the Prairie Lily, and he will carry her back to his tepee with the horn cattle and ponies of her father, while my warriors will have the scalps of her people."

"Bahl! the Red Dog is a fool and speaks with a crooked tongue."

"Let him know that it is the Big Medicine that talks to him, and whom he doubtless believed dead, when he came on this raid."

The Indian was greatly annoyed, that was evident, and bowed his head for an instant, as though at a loss to find words to reply.

Then he said:

"Let the Big Medicine Chief speak and the Red Dog will act."

"I know well that the Red Dog will obey my bidding and it would be an evil day for him and his warriors if they refused."

"Let him wait for the Big Medicine to speak," and turning to the Don the American said, speaking now in Spanish:

"Don Castro, the Comanche chief and his braves will at my bidding, at once depart and leave you unmolested."

"Can this be true, senor?" asked the Don in surprise, while the Senorita Rena cried:

"Ah, Senor Melton, do not raise our hopes to dash them to the ground in despair."

"I will prove my words, senorita," and once more turning to the chief he called out in English:

"Let the Red Dog and his warriors return to their villages in the mountains, and let them go at once."

"The Red Dog has ears. He hears and he will go," was the reply of the Indian chief, and he rode back toward his line of warriors, who at a few words from him, silently fell in behind him, and the column dividing up on the other side of the hacienda, stretched far out over the prairie in the shape of a huge V, the further end of which gradually lengthened, until they merged into one long line moving across the plains.

The Don, his daughter and the American watched them until they were fairly on their way, and it was evident that they no longer had hostile intentions against the hacienda, and then Rena said earnestly:

"Senor Melton, I owe you more than life, and my lips shall offer to Heaven each night a prayer for you."

"Yes, senor, nothing that I can do will repay you for this act of yours," and Don Castro grasped the hand of the American, who responded quietly:

"The power was mine, Don Castro, to save the senorita and yourself and I made use of it."

"But what power could you hold over those savage natures, Senor Melton?" asked Rena.

"That of making them obey as you saw."

"But I will tell you the secret of my power, if you care to hear of it."

"Indeed would we like to know," cried the Don.

"Well, I suppose you know that I once studied medicine and surgery, and some year or more ago I came upon the chief Red Dog wounded and dying, for had he not received aid, he would have died."

"I was hunting at the time, and I carried him to my camp, dressed his wounds and cared for him until he was able to ride, when I went with him to his village."

"His people received me kindly, when he told them what I had done, and they adopted me into the tribe as the Big Medicine, or Indian Doctor, and I remained there for some time ere I returned to my mines in Mexico."

"That they have not forgotten me, and Red Dog is thankful for the service I rendered him, you have just seen."

The Don and Rena were certainly happy over their deliverance, and again thanked the American for what he had done for them; but the maiden's heart was sad, and she left the roof, feeling that it would now be hard indeed for her to refuse her hand to one who had thus served her, should he still urge it.

"If he is generous he will not make this an excuse to urge in his favor; but I fear he is not generous, nay I doubt him, I fear him, and, though it seems sinful for me to say so after all he has saved me from, I cannot help it, for I really hate him," and Rena sought her own room.

For some time after her departure from the roof, the Don paced to and fro, while Mark Melton calmly sat down and gazed out over the prairie.

It was very evident that the same thoughts were in the mind of the Don, as had been in the brain of his daughter, as to whether the American would take advantage of his service rendered them to press his claim for Donna Rena's hand.

The same thoughts were also wandering through the mind of the American, for after a long silence he broke it with:

"Don Castro, it may seem ungenerous in me to urge my suit once more, after having placed your daughter and yourself under a lasting obligation to me; but the one aim of my life is to make the Senorita Rena Rivera my wife, and I intend to do so."

"Never, senor! unless my child marries you of her own free will, for I shall never urge it."

"Not after what I have saved you from?"

"No, and it is cowardly for you to ask it on such terms," and the Don spoke hotly.

"I do ask it however, and I shall demand it."

"And I refuse the demand."

"Hold, senor, let us see whether you will or not, when you hear what I have to say," and the face of the American wore a look which caused the Mexican to shudder; but he said:

"Well, senor, what have you to say?"

The American laughed lightly, and it grated upon the ears of his host, and then he said quietly:

"You accuse me, Don Castro, of flying from New Orleans to escape being hanged for a crime I committed, and I now accuse you of flying from Mexico for the same cause, and I know that you have a prize set upon your head," and again Mark Melton laughed in the same disagreeable way, while Don Castro Rivera turned to the hue of a corpse.

CHAPTER XL.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

DON CASTRO RIVERA was certainly deeply moved at the words of the man before him.

What there was in his past life that he wished to hide, and had kept a secret, it appeared from the words of Mark Melton was no secret to him.

The words of the man, and his manner showed the Don that Rena had not been mistaken in her judgment of his character, for, holding a secret, it was very evident that he intended to make use of it for the advancement of his own ends.

But Don Castro was determined to know just what Mark Melton knew regarding him, and, recovering his composure he said:

"Well, senor, your words assure me that you feel that we are on a par, through acts in our past lives that cause us to be fugitives from the hounds of the law."

"Yes, Don Castro."

"Your crime I know, Senor Melton, so will you kindly inform me what sin you deem me guilty of?"

"You are not Don Castro Rivera, a Texan ranchero."

"Indeed: then pray tell me just who I am?"

"You are wanted in Mexico under another name."

"Ah! and what name?"

"Don Gomez, the Conspirator."

In spite of his assumed coolness of manner the Mexican started.

Then he halted before the American, and gazing straight into the face of the one who accused him, asked in a husky tone:

"Why have you tracked me here?"

"To marry your daughter."

"You shall not have her."

"Then she shall see her father shot as a conspirator and be left alone in the world."

"Heaven have mercy!" groaned the Mexican.

"Heaven can have mercy upon you only through me, and I will give you my alternative, Don Castro."

"Well, senor?"

"I will now take my departure from your house, to return in two weeks, and then I will demand of you your daughter in marriage."

"She will yield if you ask it, and if not, tell her frankly that I know you as Don Gomez the Conspirator, and what will follow her refusal."

"Then, if she accepts me, all will be well, and I will do everything in my power to make her happy."

"If she refuses, the result shall rest upon her head."

"Now, Don Castro, kindly order my horse and I will bid you *adios*, leaving my remembrances for your fair daughter."

Mechanically Don Castro ordered the American's horse, and saw him ride forth upon the prairie, just as the *vaqueiros* of the hacienda came dashing up, having seen the Indians retreat, and were amazed that they had not attacked the place.

For an instant the Don seemed about to call upon his cowboys to seize the American, and to shoot him down if he resisted; but his better nature triumphed, for he would not take advantage of a man so wholly in his power, though that man had threatened him with death unless he acceded to his demand.

Unmolested therefore, Mark Melton rode away from the hacienda, bending his way in the direction of the Rio Grande.

He was superbly mounted and rode along at a quick pace until the sun reached the horizon, when he sought the shelter of a timber island for the night.

He had changed his course, when some miles distant from the hacienda, and his way was toward the mountains wherein were hidden the villages of the Comanches.

From the timber island where he sought shelter for the night, the horseman saw in the distance the line that marked the chaparral; which he was anxious to avoid, well knowing that within its shadows were the haunts of the Man Tigers, who, he felt, would be as merciless to him as he had threatened to be to Don Castro and his lovely daughter.

The shadows of night were about him, as he halted at a spring and dismounted, and he failed to see that he was not alone in the timber, and that others, who had long before observed his approach across the prairie, were crouching out of sight in the thicket.

Having eaten his supper, which he had been supplied with at the hacienda, he threw himself down upon his *srape* and was enjoying his first nap, when he was rudely awakened by half a dozen forms springing upon him.

The American was a powerful man; but he had six foes now to deal with, and unable to use his weapons he was, after a fierce, short struggle, securely bound.

"Which way now, senor?" asked one of the captors, addressing a man evidently the chief, who had stood apart during the struggle.

"To the camp," was the response, and horses were led out from the thicket, the prisoner was tied in his own saddle, and mounting, the captors set off with him at a sweeping gallop, Mark Melton bitterly cursing his fate and demanding again and again of his foes who and what they were.

But to all questions he received no response, and the party rode on their way in silence, the prisoner in a rage at his capture, and exceedingly anxious as to what would be his fate, as was shown by his muttered words, after his questions remained unanswered.

"If they are Man Tigers, I would not give a peso for my life."

CHAPTER XLII.

SAVED BY A WOMAN.

It will be remembered by my kind reader, that Texas Jack and the Tonkaway started in pursuit of the mysterious maiden, the counterpart of Rena Rivera, with the firm determination to follow her trail, lead where it might. Texas Jack had become most decidedly interested in following up this mystery of the prairies, and discovering just who and what this strange girl could be, that seemed to wish to avoid being known.

Observing the direction she had taken, upon leaving the hacienda, and aware that it must carry her to a certain ford on the river, he wisely determined to lose no time following the tracks slowly by night, but to strike for the crossing and there pick it up at daylight.

This plan turned out well, for the two trailers discovered at dawn that the maiden had crossed the river, and after a hasty breakfast they started on their way.

That the one they pursued was not riding very rapidly they found out after a few hours, as they beheld her in the distance.

It was not Jack's desire to catch up with her, for he was well aware that that would spoil all, but to slowly follow on her trail and discover just where she was going and who she was.

For this purpose he and the Tonkaway did not gain upon her, and when night came on went into camp, as the glimmer of a distant fire showed them that she had done the same.

But the one they were following had seen them almost as soon as they had her, as she was looking behind her at the very moment that they came in view of her.

Instantly she recognized the Prairie Rattler and his Tonkaway pard, and divined their intention to track her to the end of her journey.

This she determined to thwart, and to do so rode on as though she had not seen them.

Her going into camp and building a fire was but a blind to cause them to do the same, for soon after she once more held on her way across the prairies, leaving Jack and the Tonkaway quietly resting in a small grove of timber, and believing that she was doing the same, for the Rattler argued that, as she had seemed in no hurry to travel on her way by day, she certainly would camp all night.

But for once the Prairie Rattler was wrong in his conclusions, and it was a young girl who was very nicely fooling the famous pale-face and red-skin trailers.

Moving on her way the maiden had not gone very far, when upon ascending a rise of the prairie, a much higher roll than common she heard a sound like distant thunder.

Instantly she drew rein and listening said, after a moment:

"It is the sound of many hoofs, and they are coming this way."

"They are moving slowly, and spread out in a long line."

"They are not soldiers, for there are not that many troopers on this border."

"No, they are Indians, and they are moving cautiously, as if on the war-path."

"Ah! if I do not warn that brave man and his Indian comrade, they will be captured, for well I know that the red-skins, seeing their camp-fire, will quietly surround the timber, and they cannot escape."

So saying the maiden waited a little while longer, and as though having determined what she would do, she wheeled her horse and rode back on her trail at a rapid gallop.

There are half a thousand of them, and they are evidently going toward the river settlements; but I will save the senor and the Indian; they little dream there are so many Comanches abroad and so far down from their villages."

After a rapid gallop of several miles she drew near the timber.

The camp-fire of the campers was burning dimly,

and knowing the keen hearing of the men, and their constant sense of danger, she was surprised not to be halted by them, and believed them to be asleep.

But she was mistaken, for the hoof-falls had warned both Jack and the Tonk, and they were watching her approach, with surprise at beholding her on the back trail, when they recognized who she was.

Not wishing to catch a shot in the dark, the maiden gave a slight hail.

"Well, senorita, friends are awaiting you," answered Jack, stepping out of the thicket.

"Senor. I am aware that you have been on my trail, and to throw you off of it, I left my camp soon after dark to come upon a very large party of Comanches."

"Hail and where, senorita?" asked Jack in amazement.

"They are coming this way, and knowing that when they caught sight of your camp-fire, they would dismount a number of warriors and surround this little clump of timber and capture or kill you, I returned to warn you of your danger, and thus in part repay the debt I owe you."

"Senorita, in my inmost heart I thank you, for, by following the tactics you suggest, the Comanches could have doubtless taken the Tonk and myself at a great disadvantage, and we might have lost our scalps; but will you not now allow us to serve as your escorts to your home?"

"No, senor, and I must bid you *adios*, for there is no time to lose, as the Indians, by this time, must have reached a point yonder from whence they have discovered your camp-fire."

"And you still refuse to allow us to go with you?"

"Yes, senor; good-night," and turning her horse, she rode away.

Jack stood a while in deep thought, which was interrupted by the Tonkaway saying:

"Must move now, think another time."

"True for you, Tonk, so let us be off," cried Jack, and they hastily saddled and mounted their horses.

"To home?"

"No, Tonk. I will see which way those red-skins are going and what they are up to, so that we can alarm the rancheros in their way."

"And girl?"

"We must give up her trail for the present, Tonk."

"All same," replied the Indian, and the two rode rapidly out of the way of danger.

Having gotten out of the way of the marching band of red-skins, they sought refuge in a thicket, from whence they could emerge after the Comanches had passed.

Little suspecting to find another foe in their path, they were suddenly taken aback to have a lariat settle over their shoulders, and before they could even draw a weapon, to be dragged from their horses and securely bound, though not until after a terrible struggle.

From the quiet way in which their captors worked Jack knew that they were not Indians, who would have given vent to yells at their victory over them.

Then, too, their having been lariatated, was against their being red-skins, while these seeming anxious to make no sound during the struggle, was proof to him that they were aware of the vicinity of the Comanches.

In silence the party sat while the rumbling sound in the distance told the Prairie Rattler and the Tonkaway that the large band of red horsemen were going on their way, and that they had delayed to search the timber where they had encamped, was very evident from the time it had taken them to reach the point opposite where they now lay captives.

"They have gone by; now to camp," said one of the captors speaking in Spanish, and a few moments after the party rode out of the thicket with their prisoners, and Jack muttered aloud:

"Tigers of the Chaparral, as I live."

"Yes, we are Man Tigers, Texas Jack, and we want you," said one in English, and in the speaker Jack recognized an old foe.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A PLOT OVERHEARD.

"WELL, Tonk, this is dreary work, and I would not be surprised if the Tigers ended our days right here."

"Maybe talk straight," answered the Indian and silence fell upon the two friends once more.

That luck had gone hard with them there was no manner of doubt, for they were in the power of the Man Tigers, hidden away in the prison den of the chaparral, in the very midst of the outlaws' lair.

They were securely bound, and to escape without aid was utterly impossible.

It was night, and the two were plotting in their minds some way to escape, when a form suddenly appeared before them.

"Ah! you have come to bring us our delightful supper, of cold buffalo-meat and water," said Jack, as the man entered the cavern-like place in which they were confined.

"No, senor, I have come to do better than that," was the answer.

"Well?"

"You do not know me, I see."

"Your voice is familiar— Ah! you are the cut-throat whose life I once spared for serving as my guide?"

"Yes, senor, I am Paulo."

"I know you now; but what do you wish?"

"To set you free, senor."

"Ah! for what purpose?"

"To pay the debt I owe you for not taking my life."

"You are indeed grateful, if in earnest."

"I am in earnest, senor."

"I will not go without the Tonkaway."

"He shall go too; but let me cut those bonds," and he soon severed the thongs that bound Texas Jack's hands and feet.

Then he freed the Tonkaway, and the two prisoners began to move about and rub their limbs to start the circulation of the blood; for they were badly cramped.

"You are free, senor, and I will direct you where to find your saddles, bridles and arms, and your horses are in the chaparral corral back of the Den; but you must go alone, for I shall at once save my

neck by departing for parts unknown, as I intend to lead a different life in future, having saved up a few pesos, and I start out by doing this good turn for you, and the Tonkaway."

"Better go with us, my man, for I can give you a job as cowboy."

"No, thank you, señor, for I wish to go far from here."

"But I must be off, so *adios*," and the Mexican glided away without another word.

Jack stood in silence a moment and then said:

"Tonk, we are free."

"Straight talk."

"Now to get our weapons and horses if we can find them."

"Heap sense."

"Then to start off once more and pick up the trail of that strange girl."

"Red Snake ready all time."

"Well, we'll just get out of this accursed place, and once I find the girl, I will guide a company of soldiers from the fort against those Tigers."

Noiselessly the two then glided away from their prison pen.

They felt cramped, had not been well fed, and consequently were not in the best of conditions.

But they were no longer in bonds, and that was to them half the battle.

Gliding along the path, which the Tonkaway knew led to the outlaws' quarters in the pile of rocks, they soon heard voices in song and revel.

Creeping closer they found that the Man Tigers were having a good time in their quarters.

While waiting to discover just where their saddles and arms were kept, they beheld two men come out of the shadow of the rocks, and halt near them.

"Ha! one is the Tiger King," whispered Jack.

"Other no hair on face now, but know him," the Tonkaway whispered back.

"Sh!" said Jack as the Tiger King spoke, and what was said the Prairie Rattler heard distinctly.

"Well, Mark," said the Tiger King, "little did I think of ever seeing you in this country."

"Misfortune drove me here, as it did you; but it seems that my capture by your men was an act of Providence, and now that I find in the Tiger King my own brother John, I think it but right that he should help me in a little affair of the heart, when it will bring gold to his coffers."

"I will do all in my power Mark, for kinship's sake though I am not opposed to taking the gold."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"You have heard of Gomez the Mexican conspirator?"

"Yes."

"Well, I love his daughter, and intend to marry her."

"Help me to do so, and you can carry the father to Mexico and get the price offered for his head."

"It is a bargain, Mark, and when shall it be?"

"I will tell you all, and my plot, for it was to make it known that I asked you to come out here with me where we could not be heard by your men."

Then the man, Mark Melton, told his brother, the Tiger King, his plot to marry poor Rena Rivera and at the same time get rid of her father.

That plot Texas Jack overheard, word for word, and then when the two wicked brothers returned to the cavernous chambers of the outlaws' den, the two listeners hastily sought and found their arms, and then seeking the outlaw corral secured their horses and were riding away, when suddenly they were halted by the guard, who had been quietly sleeping on his post of duty, and unseen by them.

A shot followed the command of the guard to halt, and he fell dead from a bullet sent through his brain by the Prairie Rattler.

"Now, Tonk, we must ride for it, for yonder come the Tigers," cried Jack.

And away they dashed into a path through the chaparral.

But they had been seen by the outlaws, who mounted in hot haste and went in pursuit.

"We must ride hard, Tonk, for they'll press us to the bitter end," said Jack as they sped along.

"Heap sense, and heap bad man."

"Yes, and you said you knew that brother of the Tiger King?"

"Red Snake speak straight."

"Who is he then, Tonk?"

"Him white chief of Comanche?"

"Ha! it is Iron Arm the renegade with his beard shaved off."

"They are a precious pair of brothers, Tonk, and we must not let them catch us," and having gained the prairie, the two sped swiftly along in their flight.

But soon through the darkness they beheld their foes in hot chase, and there were a number of them in the pursuit, and urging their horses hard to overtake the fugitives.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SEEKING LIFE IN A DEATH-TRAP.

"I TELL you, Tonk, they have got us headed off." The remark came coolly from the lips of Texas Jack, as he glanced over his shoulder at a long line of horsemen spread out upon the prairie behind him, and more than a score in number.

The Tonkaway was riding by his side, and both were urging their horses hard, but the utterly worn out brutes could only go at a slow canter, for their eyes were sunken, their flanks hollow, and they panted like hounds under the hard pace at which they had been driven.

"Yes, but prairie heap bad when got no good horse," answered the Tonkaway, glancing toward the green rolling prairie behind them.

"And the Staked Plain is before us, Tonk."

"Heap bad, too," said the Indian, calmly.

"Right there you are, Tonk; it is a death-trap seemingly to all who enter it, except the Wild Riders; but we must invade its sterile wastes, and see how far yonder Tigers dare follow us."

"Maybe follow far."

"Not on horseback, that is certain, for their horses are as badly used up as are ours, and when these two brave animals drop, yonder line of horseflesh will go under, too."

"Maybe we drop, Tiger drop, too."

"Well, if we lead them to their death, even if we die on the Staked Plain, we will have accomplished some good in the world, Tonk."

"Heap bad good us die, too," was the philosophical response of the thoughtful Tonkaway.

"I agree with you, Tonk; but we must risk the Plain, or stand and fight it out, with the chances all against us."

"White brother have heap sense; go on."

"Then on it is; come, my noble horses, we must invade the death-trap ahead of us that we may hope to live, though I very much fear me that you will drop dead upon its hot sands ere you have gone many miles."

The position of the two men was certainly critical, for the Staked Plain loomed up before them, with all its horrors to warn them off, while behind them came their bitter foes, the Tigers of the Chaparral, who were pressing them hard.

With their horses laboring under the disadvantage of having been hard ridden before their capture, good as were the animals, Jack and the Tonkaway had only been able to hold their own ahead of their foes in the long and tedious flight.

Several times had the Texan thought of changing his course, and flying toward the hacienda of Don Rivera; but had he come out upon the trail of the strange girl, Camila, and hated to return without being able to give some account of her, so he held on to the northward, hoping that his enemies would give up the chase, or he have some opportunity of eluding them.

Now, with the Staked Plain upon one hand and the Tigers upon the other, he had but one course to pursue, either to fight against fearful odds, or to face the terrors and dangers of the desert whose borders were strewn with the bones of human beings and animals that had perished upon it.

Straight for the barren waste then they turned their horses' heads, and soon were once more penetrating the dreary scene where they had so nearly lost their lives upon a former occasion.

"We are in for it now, Tonk."

"Yes."

"Hark! the Tigers are cheering, for they think we are going to certain death, if we do escape their fury."

"Maybe so," was the response of Red Snake.

"And may be not, Tonkaway, for we still live, and I shall look upon the bright side until my eyes are shut by death."

"Heap sense," muttered the Tonkaway, recovering his tired horse as he nearly fell.

And on they rode, at the same weary canter, right toward the heart of the Plain, while behind them came the Tigers.

Reaching the border of the desert, the Tigers came to a halt.

Then Texas Jack saw them water their horses at the last pool, and where he had no time to stop.

Men and horses seemed greatly refreshed by the cooling draughts, and the latter especially by a few mouthfuls of grass.

Then the Tigers stretched forth in a long line, and continued the pursuit into the desert.

The temporary rest and water gave them a great advantage over the horses of the Texan and the Tonkaway, and Jack muttered:

"They got a twelve hours' longer lease on life by that drink, Tonk."

"Yes, heap bad for us," was the complacent reply.

As though determined to press the fugitives to the utmost, the Tigers rode on at all the speed they could get out of their jaded animals, and began to gain in the chase.

Seeing this, the Texan and the Tonkaway dismounted and ran by the side of their horses, and once more held their own.

Taking example from the fugitives, the Tigers also dismounted, and thus relieved of weight, their horses once more began to gain, for the rest, if but for a few moments, and the water, had indeed greatly refreshed them and given them a longer lease on life.

Pitilessly the sun beat down upon the heads of all, though it was drawing near the western horizon, and the burning heat from the parched earth was almost intolerable to man and beast alike.

At last the trot slowed down to a walk, and when Jack and Red Snake again mounted, they could not urge their horses forward at a faster gait.

But the Tigers were unable to push on any faster, or at least so very little faster, that they saw that it would take miles yet before they could come up with the fugitives, and the darkness of night would be upon them before then.

At last one of the Man Tigers halted and dismounted, and the line wavered.

Then another stopped still, and one by one they came to a halt, until their leader was alone in his desire to press on.

But he too was forced to yield while yet light and strength remained for them to find their way back.

"They have given it up, Tonk," said Jack.

"Yes."

"There, they have turned back; but we will move on until we find a sand-hill to hide us from them."

"Yes."

And on the two fugitives pressed, while their foes had turned back, and at last the sand-hill was reached, and horses and riders sunk down in utter prostration upon the hot earth.

CHAPTER XLV.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

It was a relief to Texas Jack and the Tonkaway to see their foes turn back, not daring to face the death desert further; but they certainly were in no condition themselves to be joyous, for their horses were used up, and they were little better, with no hope, that they could see them, of relief.

They felt that the Tigers could return to the pool and refresh themselves and horses, and grass was near for the latter, while game could be killed for the riders, who could then stretch out a line of miles along the border of the desert to watch for the return of their foes.

After a night on the hot plain, without water and without food, the Tigers knew that the human nature of even the Prairie Rattler and his red companion would be used up; but if not, the following day must certainly finish them, so they would wait awhile on sentinel duty along the border.

In the mean time Texas Jack and the Tonkaway were resting themselves and their horses, but it

was simply a rest, and not refreshing to man or beast.

"We'll wait until the sun sets, Tonk, then get a few hours' sleep if we can, and then strike for a point some miles from where the Tigers followed us into the desert, for I am confident that they will watch for us until they are certain we are dead," said the Texan.

"Think pony stand it all right?"

"Yes, Tonk; they will have rest, if not food and water, and can hold out until we get back to the prairie, I hope."

"Maybe; but mighty hot here."

"Your words are wisdom, Mister Tonkaway, as regards the heat, for I feel in blisters from head to foot, and were I to bore here for an artesian well, am confident that I would soon strike his Satanic majesty's dominions."

"Maybe," rejoined the Tonkaway, not understanding a word that Texas Jack had said.

With their saddles upon the ground, and their *serapes* to keep the heated ground from fairly scorching them, they made the best of their unfortunate situation, and watched the sun go down with real pleasure.

After its heat was no longer felt falling directly upon them, they tried to gain some rest, as did also the horses that lay upon the ground panting as though they had just halted from a hard race.

In uneasy snatches sleep came to men and beasts, until at last Texas Jack thought that it must be nearly midnight, and roused the Indian.

To his surprise the Tonkaway seemed to feel the heat more than he did, and no longer sprung up with his usually elastic step.

"Come, Tonk, are you awake?" called out Jack.

"Maybe; feel heap bad here," and he placed his hand upon his head.

"Come, old fellow, we must be off, and find water as soon as possible, for I am giddy as a fandango belle, myself," and Jack aided the red-skin to mount his horse.

Then he clambered up into his own saddle, and taking his bearings as well as he could by the stars, they set out upon their way.

The Tonkaway as they rode along was silent, and with bowed head clung to his saddle as though he feared he would fall.

Several times Jack spoke to him but received only a guttural sound for an answer.

"Come, old chief, you mustn't give up, but keep a stiff upper lip."

"It isn't like you to break down," cried Jack, really greatly alarmed for his red friend.

"Me want stop," at last said the red-skin.

"No, no, it is not far now, so push on," and Jack was fearful lest a halt might be their destruction.

"Red Snake go no further—trail end here," said the Tonkaway, and he slipped quietly from his saddle.

Instantly Jack sprung to his side.

"My dear Tonk, don't give up, for we must find water soon, and timber where you can lay in the shade and rest, while I take care of you."

"No, Red Snake have to die—go to happy hunting-grounds—much heap water there—plenty trees, heap game—have good time."

"By Heaven! but I believe that he is dying," cried Jack, in a tone of deep distress, and again he tried to arouse the Tonkaway to once more struggle on.

But it was of no use, for the Indian seemed to feel that the grip of death was upon him, and that it was useless to go any further.

"White brother go—leave Red Snake."

"By Heaven! have we been together all this time, Tonkaway, for you not to know me better than to think I would desert a dying friend?" and Jack's voice quivered.

"Don't white brother feel heap bad. Red Snake have to die, want save friend while can."

"When you die, Tonk, I'll be here to bury you; but you must make an effort to save yourself."

"No, strong all gone; arms, legs, like pappoose."

"Poor, poor fellow," and Jack grasped the hand of his red friend and sat in silence by his side.

Presently the Tonkaway began to talk at random, and spoke of green prairies, cool waters, plenty of game, and the happy villages of his people.

Then he ceased his chatter and for a long time remained silent.

Suddenly he broke forth in his death-song, and sung it loud and clear.

He recited his battle-scenes and deeds of valor, and seemed to feel that he was dying of a wound received in a fierce combat with his foes.

Then he suddenly sprung to his feet, and with a fierce, ringing war-cry fell backward in the arms of Texas Jack.

"Great God! he is dead! My poor, poor friend, those accursed Tigers drove you into this desert to die; but you shall be avenged."

Laying the body down gently, Texas Jack sat gazing down in the darkness, upon the stern, upturned face of the noble Tonkaway.

His own brain throbbed wildly, his throat was parched, and his eyes fairly burned him, and he knew not how long before he too might be taken as had been the poor Tonkaway.

But he set to work with his knife to dig a grave.

The earth yielded readily, and in an hour's time he had hollowed out the last sepulcher of his dead friend.

Wrapping the Tonkaway in his *serape*, he placed him in the grave, and then put his belt of arms and string of scalps by his side, after which he filled in the grave.

Rising to his feet he tottered, for his brain was dizzy, and turning to his horse he quickly mounted, while he said:

"Farewell, brave, noble Tonkaway, and may your body rest in peace, and your dream of joy in the happy hunting-grounds be realized!"

Then he rode slowly on, the horse of Red Snake walking by his side.

For miles he held on his way, and it seemed to him that the plain of desolation would never merge into the prairie of life and beauty.

But he was bewildered, took no heed of whither he was going, and when at last the dawn broke, he uttered a groan, wrung from his brave heart by despair, for nowhere was there visible a sign of vegetation; only the seemingly boundless desolate desert.

"I can go no further," he muttered, and he reeled in his saddle.

But, as he did so, his quick ear detected a sound of hoof-falls, and over a sand-hill dashed a party of horsemen.

Instantly he threw himself upon the defensive, determined to sell his life dearly, for they must be the Tigers of the Chaparral, he thought.

But as they drew nearer, his half-blinded eyes told him that they were a party of the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain.

These also he had looked upon as foes, and he was ready to die in his tracks if they attacked him.

But suddenly there dashed a horse and rider to the front, and a clear voice shouted:

"Ah, señor, once more we meet, and thank Heaven I am just in the nick of time to save you, for you have the Plain fever upon you, I see."

CHAPTER XLVI.

CAMILA.

I WILL now return to the strange girl, the double of Senorita Rena Rivera, who called herself by the simple name of Camila.

After her saving Texas Jack and the Tonkaway as she did, she departed alone on her way, as the reader will remember, and with the air of one who had a certain destination in view and knew how to reach it.

Her white horse seemed fully as equal to the task of carrying her as she was of riding, although both had had such a fearful experience together when chased by Iron Arm, the renegade chief, whom the reader now knows in all the wickedness of his career.

At last, as she rode along, the prairies began to wear a changed look, being no longer green and full of beauty.

The land had a barren aspect, and before her it seemed to grow more and more into a desolate waste.

But she did not hesitate, holding her course toward a small growth of sickly-looking trees.

Into these she rode and halted for rest and water at a small pool.

A stay of half an hour in the dreary place, and then she boldly headed her horse directly into the desolation of the Staked Plain.

The noble white showed no tardiness about going, and did not hang back as did many horses who knew by instinct what was before them.

Riding without any apparent guiding marks, yet the maiden seemed to change her course from time to time with strange regularity, turning here and there at right angles, until had her trail been mapped out, it would have presented the appearance of the line of a pair of stairs.

For several hours she rode into the desert, following this zigzag course, and then before her loomed up a pile of what appeared to be stones.

But upon approaching nearer to it, all its ghastliness stood out in bold relief, for it was but a monument of bones, human and brute alike.

There were human skulls here and there, and one, with all its grinning white teeth, surmounted the top of the bone monument, which was about ten feet in height.

Then there were the heads and bones of cattle, of deer, of horses, wolves and coyotes, until a dozen different species of the animal kind aided humanity in the weird monument.

Reaching this ghastly pile, and with only a cursory glance at it, the maiden held on her way in a straight line directly into the desert.

As the bone monument was almost out of sight behind her, there came before her vision a wrecked wagon, which had evidently been there for years, and, as this also disappeared from her view, as she looked over her shoulder, a scrub tree, with no life in it, was visible standing straight in her course.

By this also the maiden rode, going deeper and deeper into the desert, though she began to feel the heat, as did also the panting horse.

Without apparent dread she held on, and if she had any objects to guide her further, they certainly would not have been visible to the eye of any companion that might have been with her.

Now she no longer went on a zigzag course, but kept on a bee-line deeper into the Staked Plain, wholly unmindful, it seemed, that she had left many miles behind her, and passed a monument of the bones of men and animals that it had proven fatal to.

At last, as the sun neared its setting, there appeared before her a lot of sand-hills, higher than those that had before met her view.

As she drew nearer to them their appearance seemed to present a strange regularity, and there seemed to be a ridge of them extending for half a mile.

Suddenly over the summit of one of the sand-hills dashed a horseman, then another, and another, until a dozen men were riding toward her at lightning speed.

But she did not bring her horse to a halt, nor show the slightest sign of fear, but rode directly on toward the coming horsemen, who were waving their broad sombreros and shouting like Indians.

As they drew nearer it could be seen that their faces were darkly bronzed, their dress was of buckskin, and they wore white sombreros, while they were splendidly mounted, their horses being equipped with superb saddles and bridles, and one and all of the riders were armed to the teeth.

In advance, upon a horse as black as ebony, rode a young man with a dark face that was womanly in the beauty of its features, and yet full of stern resolve and reckless courage.

He was attired in a better costume than the others, wearing his leggings in handsome top-boots, gold spurs, and a white plush Mexican jacket over a silk shirt.

Upon his head was a white sombrero, embroidered in gold thread, about his sash was a red silk scarf half hiding a belt of arms, and his saddle, bridle and weapons were all gold-mounted and of exquisite workmanship.

Like the very wind his noble black carried him over the desert, while he sat in the saddle as though hardly conscious of any motion.

Before reaching the maiden he took off his broad white sombrero, and waving it around his head, shouted in tones that rung like bugle notes:

"Bravo! Camila, back to our Desert Island I welcome you!"

The next instant he wheeled his horse alongside of her, and drawing her toward him kissed her affectionately, while he said:

"Thank Heaven you are home again, Camila, for I was just about to start out to find you or to wreak a fearful revenge upon those who had harmed you."

"But come, you look pale and ill, and need rest."

The next instant the flying horsemen circled around her with welcoming cries, and the whole party rode on together toward the sand-hills, upon which other forms were now visible, waving their hats in welcome and joy at the return of the wanderer.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE WILD RIDERS.

ANY one approaching the sand-hills with Camila, and her escort of dashing horsemen, would have at once solved the secret of the Wild Riders being able to penetrate the Staked Plain, beyond all fear of pursuit.

The sand-hills were a natural formation; that is, for centuries the winds had added drifts to them, and made them almost in the form of a circle, some half-mile in diameter, with the interior hollow.

Here at some time long years before had been a *motte*, or timber island, but the trees were stunted in their growth by the soil and the heat.

Around this clump of timber the winds had drifted the sand, forming a grand circular fortress.

Within this bowl, with its wall of sand, the Wild Riders had found a safe retreat, and diligently had they worked to improve it.

Wells had been dug here and there, and the deeper soil placed as a top soil upon the sand.

Rich loam had been hauled by wagons from a long way off and placed here and there where most needed, while trees, grass and even vegetables had been cultivated.

There was stabling, a species of dug-out in the sand, for half a hundred horses, stacks of hay, gathered upon the prairies and brought on the backs of ponies to the retreat, while the grazing-ground was amply sufficient for ordinary uses.

In the timber, sheltered by the dwarfed trees, were a dozen tents in a row, and off to one side were three others, two of them larger and better than the others.

To one passing on the plain within a few hundred feet, he would have seen only a ridge of sand-hills, which he cared little to toil over, little dreaming that a camp was within.

But few ever dared penetrate the desert thus far, and hence the Wild Riders were safe in their retreat.

Toward the three tents standing by themselves the young leader of the Wild Riders, for such was the personage who had so warmly welcomed Camila, led the way.

Arriving there, he aided her to dismount and conducted her to one of the larger tents, saying:

"Camila, I am so happy in seeing you once more in your old home, so rest yourself, and Nana will soon have something prepared for you to eat."

The one spoken of as Nana then appeared, coming from the smaller tent between the two larger ones.

She was a handsome peon girl, and warmly greeted Camila, who was her mistress, speaking in a Spanish *patois*.

Retiring to her tent, accompanied by Nana, Camila threw herself down upon a cot, for she seemed very tired, while the peon girl laid out for her other clothing, and got water from the spring for her bath.

In the mean time, the news of the maiden's return had spread through the camp, which numbered some forty men, all of them dark-faced Mexicans, with a bold, reckless air.

Together they stood in groups, discussing the return of the young Queen of the Wild Riders, whom they had given up as lost, and wholly in the dark as to what had happened to her, or where she had been.

After awhile Camila came from her tent, looking refreshed, and she was met by Don Rivas, the captain of the Wild Riders, who led her to the awning beneath which they ate their meals.

They chatted away pleasantly together while discussing the food, and afterward took seats in easy-chairs before the tent of the young chief.

"Now, Camila, I am anxious to have you tell me of your adventures, for I am dying of curiosity to know how it is that you most mysteriously disappeared one day, and then returned after some days' absence, while I was away, to again almost immediately depart upon another mysterious jaunt?"

"Ronaldo, since I last saw you, I have been more than twice nearer death than I supposed it possible for me to be and yet live," said Camila, quietly, while a look of alarm came over the face of the chief, as he said quickly:

"My poor girl, tell me all about it."

"You know that upon your last raid, as you wished to make a visit to the lower settlements, you asked me if I could return to the Desert Island alone?"

"Yes, I remember, and you started alone, greatly to my regret afterward."

"I was surprised and captured by a band of Comanches, who carried me to their chief in the mountains, and he was none other than Iron Arm, the renegade."

"That bound?"

"Yes; but it seems he had sent his warriors to capture one other, and he believed me to be that one; but I will tell you all as it occurred," and Camila told the story of how she had believed Iron Arm to be mad, and had fled from him, and her rescue at the cliff by Texas Jack.

"That splendid fellow saved you then?"

"Yes, he and his Indian friend, a Tonkaway."

"I shall not forget the debt I owe them, Camila; but pray go on with your story."

Then Camila told of her recapture with Texas Jack, their rescue by the Tonkaway, and her being carried to the hacienda of Don Castro Rivera as his daughter.

Situated as she was, the Queen of the Wild Riders, she dared not tell who she was, and so made her escape at night and returned to her Desert Island to find Don Ronaldo away with half of his men.

While riding on the plain a day or two after, she had come upon Texas Jack and the Tonkaway, and had saved them from dying there, while she, upon

her return to the retreat, was set upon by a band of Man Tigers and captured.

Her second rescue by Texas Jack and the Tonkaway she made known, and how once again, when unconscious, she had been taken to the hacienda of the Don as Rena Rivera.

Again she had made her escape, and what followed on her trip to the plain she also made known.

"Now, Ronaldo, you know all, and I will hear the story which you have to tell," she said.

"My poor child, through what have you not passed, and I owe it to that gallant Prairie Rattler that you are not dead."

"Yes, I have a story to tell, and it is one that hinges strangely upon your own, for I discovered, upon my return to the retreat, a band of Man Tigers with a captive."

"That captive I saw and believed to be you, so I made a desperate charge upon them, and rescued the one that I thought was yourself."

"I had no time to tarry, and dashed along at full speed, until we were near the desert, and then I discovered my mistake."

"But I brought her on here for safety, as I had too few men with me, and she became my guest for a few days, until able to stand the ride home, occupying your tent."

"That lady was the Donna Rena Rivera, and, Camila, she is the living image of yourself, as you must know, having seen her."

"I asked her not to divulge the secret she had discovered regarding me, and she pledged her word that she would not."

"Nor would she tell me, even, Ronaldo, though she certainly knew who I was."

"Yes, for I spoke to her of you, and, sister mine, as I love you so much, and found one not my sister, who was your image, my whole heart went out to her, and I confessed my idolatry for her."

"And her answer, brother?"

"She bade me hope."

"The Virgin be praised, my brother, for Rena Rivera is an angel on earth!" was the earnest response of the Wild Rider's sister.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE COMPACT.

WHEN Texas Jack heard the ringing, musical voice, as he stood at bay upon the Staked Plain, he turned his bedimmed eyes upon the one who had called out to him, and beheld none other than Camila, the Queen of the Wild Riders.

"She still lives," he muttered, as she came toward him and halted, crying:

"Well, Senor Rattler, you are again tempting and daring the dangers of the Staked Plain, I see?"

"I am, senorita, but it is from no desire of mine on this occasion, as I was driven hither by the Tigers, from whom I escaped, and my poor friend, the Tonkaway, lies buried on the Plain, for he had to succumb to the heat."

"The Tonkaway dead?"

"Yes, senorita."

"Poor fellow; my men shall bury him, and—"

"I have done that last service for him, senorita."

"Come, senor, it is cruel of me to stand here and talk to you while you suffer."

"Here, take a draught of water from my canteen, and mount one of my men's horses, for he can follow slowly on your own— Aid him there, for do you not see he is too weak to mount by himself?" called out Camila Rivas, and two of the Wild Riders sprung to his side.

"Now, senor, we will push on as rapidly as you dare go, for you need attention I plainly see," and riding by his side Camila set the pace at a gallop, followed by her band of Wild Riders, while one of the men followed more slowly with Yellow Chief, who had also been refreshed by the contents of a canteen, which every rider carried for his horse as well as for himself.

Strengthened by the draught of water, and cooled by the rapid motion, Texas Jack felt more like himself, and gazed with amazement upon the Desert Island, as the Riders called their camp, when he rode into it.

Straight up to her brother's tent rode Camila, accompanied by Jack, and Don Ronaldo gazed at them with surprise as they rode up.

"Brother, this is Senor Texas Jack, the one who has saved my life more than once, and whom I found almost dying upon the Plain in my gallop a while ago."

"Senor Jack, this is my brother, Don Ronaldo Rivas, Captain of the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain."

Jack was almost struck dumb at what he saw and heard; but the young chief stepped to his side and grasped his hand warmly.

"I am most happy to meet a gentleman of whom I have heard so much."

"Dismount, senor, and accept of what hospitalities an humble camp can offer you."

Jack returned the grasp of the hand, and responded:

"And I am happy to meet you, Senor Capitan, of whom I have heard much that I now, seeing you, believe to have been untrue."

"Thanks for those words, senor; but you look ill, and we must nurse you back to your former gallant self."

The chief gave Texas Jack a cot in his own tent, and after he had partaken of rest and food he did indeed feel himself again, though he felt sad at the fate of the poor Tonkaway.

That evening, when they were seated, the chief, Camila and their guest, before the tent of the young captain, Jack told of his capture by the Tigers and of the discovery he had made of their plans.

Instantly Don Ronaldo sprung to his feet, while he cried:

"They intend to carry out this plot against Don Rivera and his beautiful daughter, do they?"

"Yes, senor, if I cannot prevent it."

"But you can, for you shall lead the Wild Riders to the rescue."

"Bravo, Senor Capitan, bravo! now we will clip the Tigers' claws," said Jack, with delight.

The young captain paced to and fro a moment in silence, and then halting in front of his guest, he said in a low, distinct voice:

"Senor Jack, you have doubtless heard hard things said against the Wild Riders of the Staked Plain?"

"I have, señor, I am sorry to say."
 "You have heard it said of them that we raided the settlements, killed, pillaged, ran off stock, and other terrible things?"
 "Yes, señor."

"Now you have been over the Texas prairies from the Rio Grande to the Brazos, and from the Indian Territory to New Mexico?"

"I have, captain."
 "Have you ever yourself seen a Wild Rider do the deeds of which we are accused?"

"I have not, sir."
 "Nor any one else, for we are not robbers, Señor Jack; but I will tell you just what we are."

"A glance is sufficient to show that we are Mexicans, and I am the only one of the band that is not wholly so."

"But my mother was an American lady, whom my father met while traveling in the States and married."

"I am an officer in the Mexican army, and was detailed for secret service."

"That secret service was to hunt out in Texas, where they had settled, all the conspirators against our Government, who keep our country in a constant state of ferment."

"There were just sixty on my list to be hunted down, and fifty-nine of that number I have either executed, or sent to Mexico as prisoners."

"I sought this Plain as a retreat, and you see we have a safe one."

"Under our name, the Tigers, the outlaws of the Chaparral have committed many deeds of outlawry; but we have done no act of wrong against Texas or Texan, our only illegal deed being in hunting down Mexican conspirators within the borders of a foreign government."

"The sixtieth man on my list you named awhile since."

"He is an American, but has long lived in Mexico and been a disturbing element."

"I refer to John Melton, the King of the Man Tigers, and known beyond the Rio Grande as Juan Meltos."

"There was one other whom I had to watch; but investigation has satisfied the Government that he was not guilty of the charges against him, and the ban of exile upon him has been removed."

"That man is known here as Don Castro Rivera but his real name is Don Valdes Gomez."

"Now, Señor Jack, with the capture of the Tiger King my duties will be ended, and I return to Mexico, so gladly will I aid you in capturing the band of Man Tigers the night they have set for the robbery of Don Rivera's hacienda, and the marriage of the Donna Rena to that villain, Iron Arm, the renegade."

"So lay your plans of action, señor, and command me and my Wild Riders to aid you."

CHAPTER XLIX. TEXAS JACK'S PLOT.

TRUE to his word, Mr. Mark Melton returned to the hacienda of Don Rivera, and was delighted to find that nothing had turned up of an unpleasant nature to mar the intended marriage.

The Don greeted him almost cordially, and Donna Rena was by no means cold in her manner toward him.

Mr. Melton was not alone, however, for he presented as his friend, Captain Elberon, an American army officer, who had been his boyhood friend, and, learning of his intention to get married, and was to depart through a dangerous country with his bride, had offered the services of himself and twenty-four soldiers as an escort.

The Don thanked the good-looking captain, assigned the soldiers to quarters in one wing of the hacienda, where they would be shown every attention, and, as they were supplied with all they could eat and drink, the rather hard-looking set of Uncle Sam's warriors seemed happy.

The following evening was to be the one upon which the wedding was to take place, and all the preparations were upon a grand scale.

A dark-faced, stern-looking priest had been sent for, and when the hour approached for the ceremony, he took his stand in the library, and the bride and groom stepped up before him, Rena dressed elegantly, yet looking very pale, and seemingly nervous.

"Is all ready?" asked the priest.
 "Yes, holy padre," cried Don Rivera, in a loud voice, and then he continued, in the same high key:

"Let the servants of the hacienda enter to witness the ceremony."

There was a slight pause, and then, through two doors there entered a party of men in buckskin, and with revolvers in their hands.

At the head of one party was Texas Jack, and leading the other was Don Ronaldo Rivas, the captain of the Wild Riders.

"Iron Arm, the renegade, you are my prisoner. Move and you are a dead man!" cried Texas Jack, springing to the side of Mark Melton and covering him with his revolver.

"Juan Meltos, the conspirator, you are a prisoner of Mexico."

"Surrender or die!" and Don Rivas was before the pretended Captain Elberon, his revolver pressed over his heart.

Neither of the two outlaw brothers dared move, but the Tiger King shouted in a stentorian voice:

"Ho, Tigers, to the rescue!"

"You call in vain, Captain Elberon; for your pretended soldiers are every one in irons, and those who are Mexicans will accompany you to Mexico, under the escort of the Wild Riders, where your evil careers will be brought to a just end."

"As for you, Iron Arm, I will care for you and the two Americans in the Tiger band, by hanging you for your crimes," and Texas Jack motioned to a Wild Rider, who quickly stepped forward and slipped irons on the wrist of the renegade chief.

The Tiger King was also ironed, and then the two were led out of the library and placed with their outlaw allies, who were a sorry-looking set of villains at the way in which their intended raid of the hacienda had ended.

Freed of their unwelcome visitors, Don Rivera and his guests passed a pleasant evening together, and many laughed over the mistakes that were made in taking Rena Rivera for Camila Rivas, and vice versa, for the fair young hostess had insisted

that they should dress exactly alike on the occasion.

As for Texas Jack, he was perfectly delighted at the success of his plot, which had been to smuggle the Wild Riders into the hacienda before the arrival of Mark Melton and his Tiger allies; but the Texan often muttered to himself:

"Poor Tonkaway! I wish you still lived to enjoy the triumph."

CHAPTER L. CONCLUSION.

WHEN Don Rivera heard from the lips of Captain Rivas that the ban of exile was removed, and that he had been found "not guilty" by his Government of the charges against him, he was a happy man, for he knew that he could live in peace.

But he told the young captain that he would not return to Mexico to live, as he loved Texas and the Americans, and would still dwell at his hacienda.

This idea seemed to please Captain Rivas, who said that he was half an American himself, and would gladly become a whole one, if the Donna Rena would promise to be his wife.

This promise Rena gave, and preparations were made for the Wild Riders to depart with their prisoners for Mexico, Texas Jack having already taken his, with an escort of cowboys, to deliver over to the commandant of the nearest army post.

"You will leave your sister with us, captain?" said the Don to the young Wild Rider chief.

"With pleasure, Don Rivera, and let me tell you a secret about Camila."

"She is not really my sister."

"Indeed!"

"No, sir; and I can tell you more."

"You were forced to leave Mexico just at the time your wife gave birth to a little daughter, as you supposed."

"Your wife died, and neither she nor yourself knew that there were two children born, little twin sisters, for the nurse, having no child of her own, quietly stole one to adopt and bring up."

"That nurse afterward came to our family to live, and brought her supposed child with her."

"She died in our service, and confessed to my mother what she had done, and thus Camila was reared as my sister."

"Now that you are no longer an exile, I tell you the secret of the startling resemblance between Camila and the Donna Rena, for they are twin sisters."

"As my mother was dead, Camila insisted upon coming with me, upon my secret service into Texas, for she has never known that she was not in reality my own sister, and she is the affianced of a young American soldier, a cousin of my mother, and he is now ordered to the Texas border, I see, with his company."

It was with feelings of the deepest pleasure that Don Rivera heard the story told him by the young Mexican captain, and sending for Rena and Camila, he made the secret known to them, seemingly to their great joy.

That night the Wild Riders and their captives started for the Rio Grande, Texas Jack arriving just in time to accompany them, at the urgent request of Don Rivera, and having to report that Iron Arm and the other prisoners he had in charge, had been made short work of by the commandant of the fort.

Jack was accompanied by Ebony, his negro major domo, for the ranchero had returned by the ranch, and taken him with him as a companion, telling him that he would have to take the place of Red Snake the Tonkaway.

"Me do my best, Marse Jack; but me don't scalp folkses, 'cause de Bible say it hain't right," responded Ebony, but he was glad to get away from his lonely life at the ranch, where he slept all day and watched all night.

After an absence of two months Don Rivera and Texas Jack returned, the latter accompanied by Ebony, and the former by a peon slave.

They received a warm welcome from the hacienda household, and the next day Jack undertook to go to the fort, and guide back Captain Vincent, the lover of Camila.

In due time he returned with the young officer, and some weeks after there was a grand double wedding at the hacienda, for Rena Rivera became the Senora Rivas, and Camila, her twin sister, took the name of Mrs. Henry Vincent, while, in spite of the numerous American officers and Mexican dignitaries present, the most honored guest of the occasion was Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.

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